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骸骨騎士様、
IV
只今異世界へお出掛け中
Skeleton Knight, going out to the parallel universe
OVERLAP

Skeleton Knight

(骸骨騎士様、只今異世界へお出掛け中)

Volume 04

A Spring and A Curse

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Story Description:

The protagonist fell asleep while playing an online game. However, he awoke in a strange world with his game character's appearance. In a state of shock, he noticed that he was equipped with nothing but his strongest weapon and armor. To make matters worse, our hero's appearance was changed by the special avatar skin『Skeleton』when he enter this new world. The protagonist wanted to live without drawing attention, but he got acquainted with the dark elf Ariana and received her request.

Original Story can be found here: Link

Prologue

The Northern Continent, Holy Leburan Empire.

In the center of the Empire's immense territory, situated on a large plain, was the capital city Habahren which boasted a total population of 80,000 people. The city was built in a circular configuration where all the main roads led to the palace of the Emperor.

In the center of the city stood the royal palace, Siguenza.

Due to it having been built as a fortress during the era of the original Leburan Empire, the palace was more of an austere structure instead of an elegant one.

There was a certain room in the palace that acted as the emperor's study.

The chandelier hanging from the ceiling was a gorgeous centerpiece that illuminated the study in a way that befitted an emperor's abode.

A large, polished work desk sat in the back of the room, in front of a throne reserved for the ruler of the country. Though the throne wasn't as exquisite as the room's other furnishings, a careful inspection of its rigid construction would reveal its true value.

The young man leaning back on the throne had a head of red, slightly curly hair that had been tied back into a braid and his lean body was adorned in a plain military uniform.

His name was Domitianus Leburan Valetiafelbe. He was the emperor of the Holy Leburan Empire that was vying for supremacy against the Great Leburan Empire.

The gray eyes of the young emperor were scrutinizing the man currently reading a recent report aloud.

"According to the report, the『Ring of Submission』that was attached to the monster held in Leibnitz' fort suddenly deactivated and it went on a rampage. A considerable amount of damage had been done to the old city district. Before it's rampage, the hydra that Funoba-sama caught broke

out of the fort, through the city gate and attacked the lord's mansion, which resulted in the lord's death. Funoba-sama has not been seen since then and there are rumors he has rebelled."

Contrary to the serious subject matter written on the report, the speaker of the report had a large smile on his face as he watched the emperor grimace behind his desk.

The man who gave the report was slightly overweight, had a poor excuse of a mustache on his face and was dressed in flashy clothes befitting a wealthy merchant.

This man was Verumoas Du Laizehl, the chancellor of the Holy Leburan Empire.

Emperor Domitianus looked at the shady looking Verumoas and thought over the contents of the report before he opened his mouth.

"I do not believe that Funoba has rebelled..... Men of the frontier are only concerned with women and liquor, right? There would be no benefit for him in opposing me."

Without changing his expression in the slightest, Verumoas tilted his head and motioned as if to say 'Even if you ask me...'.

Without acting the slightest bit concerned about the vein on the emperor's forehead that threatened to burst due to his behavior, Verumoas looked down at the report in his hands and continued.

"The hydra was apparently slain in the middle of its rampage by a mysterious monster that appeared out of nowhere. According to the witnesses, the mysterious monster appeared to be a humanoid demon cloaked in flames that has been mentioned in the local folklore. According to legends, the beast only appears to drag sinners into the inferno. Naturally, unrest is running rampant throughout the populace."

"This devil managed to kill the hydra!? Fuck, the『Ring of Submission』used on that thing had to be custom made..... If it hadn't been for Funoba it would have been difficult to capture....."

Emperor Domitianus hit his armrest in irritation and glared at

chancellor Verumoas, who continued his report.

"Even if you look at me like that, there's nothing I can do about it. Anyway, the Hiruku church was destroyed by the hydra's and the mysterious devil's battle. Representatives of the church have stepped forward and demanded the funds necessary to rebuild it. ……The citizens are anxious at the fact that the devil was the one who burnt the church down."

Verumoas raised his head to watch the emperor's reaction to that last bit of information.

However, the vein that had been threatening to burst had vanished and the emperor was floating a twisted smile on his face.

"Humph, the church has been a mere parasite for quite some time…… What became of the monsters that entered the city?"

"After the hydra was slain, a commander that had remained on site gathered the scattered soldiers and proceeded to slay them. The situation has calmed down, but it's only a matter of time before dissatisfaction sprouts among the citizens."

Feeling doubtful about the emperor's behavior, Verumoas looked up again to find him floating an even more cold-blooded smile.

"……In this situation, there is no way of maintaining the Hiruku faith in this territory. The fact the church was burnt down by the judge of sinners will undoubtedly stir up the people. Direct the people's pent-up frustration towards the church, that way only the church loses sway in the region."

"Are you sure? Won't that cause a major backlash from the church?"

"We are taking advantage of this situation to peel away the mold that has grown on my empire. In order for my empire to prosper, those who have been sitting at the table for free, with their mouths opened for donations, need to be removed. The church in Leibnitz seems to believe that they can profit from the latest incident without me noticing, but they are gravely mistaken."

“Understand. I shall handle the Leibnitz territory as you ask.”

After making a memo on his report, the chancellor respectfully bowed his head and prepared to leave.

“Also, continue the search for Funoba. Even if he is dead, the Magic Institution has already completed the standard version of the『Ring of Submission』. Worst case, we won’t be able to capture larger monsters without him, but soldiers should be able to handle those on the level of Ogres.”

The Emperor sat back in his throne with a smile on his face as he thought about the future while staring out a window that faced the direction of the Leibnitz territory.

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The Northern Continent, Great Leburan Empire.

The capital city of Vittelvare was surrounded by a giant wall made of polished stone, as if to reflect the elegance of the city itself. When a person left or entered the city, they would see impeccably maintained streets and parks, as well as a multitude of pleasant looking people chatting about.

At the center of the capital was the emperor’s palace, which was the size of a small town, dubbed Dionborg.

The leaders of the Great Leburan Empire were gathered in the palace’s assembly hall.

The current emperor, Garba Leburan Sergiophebus, sat on a luxurious throne at the apex of the national assembly.

His long white hair and beard were carefully combed back. Though the wrinkles on his forehead were thick, his eyes still carried the sharp glint of a bird of prey. Atop his head sat a gold and jewel encrusted crown that acted as the symbol of imperial authority and his body was adorned in extravagant clothes and a luxurious mantle. Though the gorgeous scepter in his hand completed his ensemble, the emperor seemed to be in a foul mood.

The cause of his mood was the report his young and handsome official aide, Saruwis de Osto, was in the middle of presenting to the national assembly.

"—The forces in Tishen were taken completely by surprise, resulting in the area falling into the East's hands. The enemy forces consist of a unit of monsters and soldiers with the strength of a company. The members of the southern army remaining in the area lack the numbers to repel them... that is all."

When Saruwis finished reading the report, the senators that sat opposite to the emperor unanimously stood and up and shouted their opinions on the matter as a wave of unrest swept over them.

"What is this! Tishen was left insufficiently defended because the units from the southern army were sent to Wetorias……! We must recall general Keling and his troops immediately!!"

"No, no, don't we need to learn how the soldiers were able to work alongside monsters!? Have you ever heard of such an absurd thing as a human and monster unit!? It just goes to show that all those eastern dogs have been tainted!!"

"That isn't the problem!! They managed to take Tishen, which is located deep within the forest at the base of the Shiana mountains!! The Febiento marsh south of the forest prevents large-scale forces from advancing because of how narrow the roads are, so how did they reach Tishen undetected!?"

"Tishen should have had quite lax defenses. It wouldn't have taken a large army to capture it in the first place. Besides, the enemy had monsters among their ranks, which allowed them to perform a lightning fast offensive strike……"

Emperor Garba snorted uninterestedly as he listened to the senators argue amongst themselves.

The emperor turned toward Saruwis with a troubled look on his face.

"The East managed to land quite a blow against us. The Southern army

has to maintain vigilance along Derufurento's border and can't afford to spare many soldiers, not to mention Tishen is surrounded on three sides by forest. Recapture is nigh impossible as we lack the units to attack from the northwest."

Emperor Garba rested his chin in his hand and frowned after he finished speaking.

"The monster attacks in Wetorias were a decoy to turn our attention towards Burugo Bay..... But where did they come from? It's an unrealistic expectation that they traversed the Febiento marsh. Our saboteur division has sprinkled『Abundant Harvest Stones』on the East's border with Rhoden to draw out monsters on that end..... though I suppose they could have incorporated those monsters into this operation."

"That is certainly possible. It's unconfirmed, but the eastern soldiers seem to have attacked from the forest near the Shiana mountain. If that's the case, then they must have devised a method to safely pass through the forest. The forest spreads across the border and connects to the Urato mountains as well, so it necessary to keep an eye on Harutobarak."

The emperor wrinkled his brow and groaned at Saruwis' suggestion. He then turned his eyes back to the still arguing senators on the assembly floor.

"The East has no interest in taking control of Burugo Bay."

After his soliloquy, the emperor took his scepter in hand and banged it against the ground twice.

The sound of the scepter hitting the ground echoed through the hall and silenced the arguing senators as they now waited to hear what the emperor had to say.

The emperor slowly rose from his throne as he stared out at the assembly.

"We shall not allow them to do as they please. The mission of recapturing Tishen shall be allotted to general Keling, who is to be recalled to Harutobarak immediately. Have Harutobarak's soldiers

prepare for the general's arrival. The task of subjugating the monsters around Wetorias shall be given to general Minzeia of the northern army. The Suwin Kingdom mercenary corps will be moved to Feburuento to maintain the defense of the northern border. The forces of the western army stationed around Asupanis shall increase their patrols as a precautionary measure! That is all!"

The emperor glared down at the national assembly as he beat his scepter against the ground again. The senators simultaneously lowered their heads as they processed the emperor's commands.

The emperor then looked back to the senators and looked to the five chancellors that normally sat behind him.

"Be sure that general Keling gathers information on the monster unit's structure. We must determine if the methods they use to construct these units are applicable to our forces."

Saruwis raised his eyebrow at that last order and voiced his concerns.

"Are you sure? Won't using the monsters be frowned upon by the Hiruku religion? There are bound to be complaints if we follow through with that decision……"

Saruwis wore a wry smile and shrugged as he mentioned his complaints in a hushed tone unbefitting of someone in his position.

Emperor Garba simply snorted at Saruwis' concerns as he returned to his seat.

"Hmmph. If I am to protect this country, I can not afford to keep my hands clean! If any bishops start to get fussy about this bribe them with whatever you see fit."

"As you command."

Saruwis' wry smile remained as he respectfully bowed to the emperor.

Chapter 1: 「Sparring」

Deep within the Great Canada Forest stood one of the many elf villages that dotted the forest, Raratoia.

This forest was home to a great number of monsters due to the abundant amount of mana in the area, so a unique wall had been erected around the village.

The majority of the wall's surface was covered by a myriad of thorns, that even wrapped around its support pillars. Only the lack of gaps in the structure revealed that it was artificially made.

The wall itself was over thirty meters tall and separated the quiet village from the dangerous forest it was built in.

Directly inside the wall was a field of crops and a wide, open pasture for the cattle to graze on. Wooden houses dotted the area beyond those places.

However, these houses were strangely shaped mushrooms. Each house had a slightly exposed wooden deck, eaves that stretched to the top and a unique pattern was carved into the supporting pillars of the houses, allowing a glimpse of elven culture.

The sidewalks were made of beautifully laid cobblestone and street lights were placed at regular intervals

In the center of this idyllic village stood a towering tree that was somehow merged with a large mansion. It served as the home of the elder.

Beneath the tree's branches, the huge trunk started to become a mixture between the natural and the artificial.

The clear glass windows cut into the trunk that allowed daylight to enter the building, the singing birds that nested in the tree and the natural sunlight that filtered through the branches contributed to the area's fantastic atmosphere.

In the front yard of the elder's mansion, two people were facing off

against each other with wooden swords in hand. Two other people were breathlessly watching them from the side.

The young woman in front of me, holding a wooden sword, took a fighting stance.

The woman was a bewitching beauty, what with her voluptuous body, lilac skin and snow white braided hair. Her inhuman golden eyes were focused directly on me and she calmly stood still as if she were full of openings.

However, the slight twitches of her long, pointed ears showed me that she was completely focused on every move I made.

The name of the women dressed in traditional elven attire, which was embroidered with an elaborate pattern, was Glenys Aruna Raratoia.

She was the village elder's wife and one of the rare dark elves on this continent.

I, on the other hand, had the appearance of an over two meters tall, fully armored knight.

This was the body of a game avatar that I used to play as under the name of Arc and I looked liked this ever since I had been thrown into this world.

Underneath my black mantle was a set of full body armor fitting for a mythical knight; fine details had been etched into every piece, along with white and blue undertones.

A jet black mantle, that was inlaid with a pattern seemingly cut from the starry night sky, hung off my shoulders.

The sword and shield I normally carried on my person were replaced with the wooden sword I was currently holding.

There was a distance of three meters between Glenys and I, and we were currently sizing each other up.

Honestly, even with the abilities of this max-level body, I doubted that I could win a contest of pure swordsmanship against an elf who has had

centuries of training.

Since we couldn't keep staring at each other forever, I lifted my wooden sword and charged at Glenys. Thanks to my abnormally high physical ability I was moving rather quickly, yet she had somehow read my movements.

My swing missed by a wide margin as she easily evaded my attack. Just as I tried to strike at the seemingly slow-moving Glenys again, I was struck on the back of my sword hand.

I didn't actually feel anything because I was protected by the mythical grade『Holy Armor of Belenus』, but I unintentionally let out an "Ouch." when I heard the metallic clink from the hit.

"Your movements are so monotonous, Arc-kun. When you advance, you don't attack, and when you attack, you don't move."

"Understood, Glenys-dono."

When I raised my sword against Glenys again, she simply nodded in reply as I tried to visualize her sword swings in my mind.

However, someone with no prior training couldn't learn swordplay overnight, so Glenys managed to dodge every one of my attacks no matter how fired up I became, before she effortlessly swatted my sword hand again.

Glenys raised an eyebrow and sighed before she offered a suggestion.

"Would you like to dodge my attacks this time?"

"Alright, Glenys-dono!"

The moment after I replied, Glenys calmly blindsided me with an array of overwhelming attacks. This body's kinetic vision and reflexes allowed me to dodge, but Glenys' sword had become a flurry of strikes and if I stopped moving for even a second, she would finish me off.

I continued to back-pedal as I dodged but before long I ran up against the tree and was swiftly hit on my gauntlet and head.

I was stunned for a moment as the sound of multiple cymbals entered

my ears and Glenys' smiling face entered my line of sight.

"It's my win?"

Glenys started to laugh after she declared her victory.

I thought I would've been better at defending myself, but the results couldn't be denied. Despite these deplorable results I held up my index finger and proposed a rematch.

"Nuu..... Glenys-dono, one more round."

"Are you sure?"

Glenys held her wooden sword over her shoulder when she asked if I wanted to continue. After that, the scene of me being struck in the head was repeated over and over again.

At one point I broke down and growled in frustration at my lack of improvement while waving my wooden sword back and forth.

The reason we were doing mock battles like this was because my next destination laid in a very dangerous area and I wanted to test my abilities against someone who had actual combat experience.

“Arc-kun, because you react to movement instinctively, it’s rather easy

for your opponents to read your movements. Because you don't read the flow of the battle, you leave yourself open to surprise attacks. You appear to be a knight, so shouldn't you take pride in your swordsmanship?"

Glenys didn't even seem tired when she gave her review of my skills.

According to her, true swordsmanship was a complex dance of reading your opponent's movements as you attacked, and my reliance on my physical ability alone was basically suicidal.

Unless I want my sword to be nothing more that a useless treasure, I needed to improve myself from now on.

While I was busy contemplating my decision, someone else decided to speak up.

"Mother, Arc's movements may be straightforward but do you think there are a lot of other people capable of reading them?"

The person who raised that question as she approached our location was a female dark elf with features similar to Glenys'.

Her womanly charms were only accentuated by the long-sleeved dress with a hem of modest length and the leather corset she wore.

Her long, snow white hair was tied in a loose ponytail that allowed it to be blown about by the wind and her golden eyes were focused on me.

She was Glenys' daughter Ariane Glenys Maple.

The majority of the elves lived in the Great Canada Forest and on top of her being Glenys' daughter, she was also a warrior of the Forest capital Maple.

We met under unusual circumstances and our friendship had the opportunity to deepen during our mission to rescue kidnapped elves. Thanks to my participation in that mission I was allowed to stay in this village despite being human.

"Well..... I suppose only a few people can keep up with Arc's movements and your enemies are gonna be monsters, right?"

Glenys tapped her chin with her finger and maintained her smile as she

took Ariane's comment into consideration.

"Arc, lend me your sword."

Holding out her right hand after she said so, Ariane wanted me to give her my wooden sword so I handed it to her without any complaints.

"It's been a while since we sparred, mother."

"Yes, it's been a while, hasn't it."

Both mother and daughter laughed a little as they took some distance from each other.

Though I called them mother and daughter, the two looked close enough in age to be considered sisters. It was hard to judge the age of people with four hundred year long lifespans by appearances alone.

"Sha!"

Ariane shouted a battle cry as she charged with her wooden sword raised. Glenys dodged the attack by taking a small step back, placing her out of the range of Ariane's sword swing. The moment after she dodged Ariane's attack, Glenys raised her own sword and launched a fierce counterattack.

After evading Glenys' attacks with movements similar to her mother's, Ariane kicked the ground to leap back in order to widen the distance.

"Well, it appears you've been influenced by your sister's bad footwork."

Glenys chuckled a bit when she saw the way Ariane leaped back.

Their movements were totally different from my own, they appeared to be engaged in a lethal blade dance that was a spectacle to watch.

It was something I couldn't hope to replicate in this full body armor, and I began to wonder if it was a smart move to study swordplay under Glenys.

I'd be more suited towards a style that took advantage of my overwhelming strength. While I was fine dealing with criminals and monsters, I was incapable of holding back against regular people.

When I had the chance, it would be a good idea to ask Ariane for some basic sword lessons, but at the moment Ariane and Glenys' bout had come to an end

Ariane's wooden sword was sent flying into the air and landed right in front of me.

Ariane was drenched in sweat as she slouched over her knees gasping for air, while Glenys was standing tall with the same smile on her face. Even my untrained eye could tell that Ariane was an extremely capable swordswoman, yet Glenys' superior abilities were truly impressive. No, astonishing would be a better description.

"Hmm, though your skills have improved, you still have room to grow."

"Hey! I would like to try as well....."

The scene of a mother smiling down at her daughter and said daughter vexingly looking up to her mother was interrupted by the other person that had watched the bout calling out to them.

Glenys turned toward the source of the exclamation.

"Oh? Chiome-chan, would you like to spar with me too?"

"By all means, please instruct me."

The girl Glenys called Chiome gave a slightly formal response as she stood up and asked for instruction.

She had short-cut, raven black hair and her blue eyes were staring straight at Glenys. Her small frame was adorned in black clothes that were easy to move in, arm and leg guards and a dagger that was strapped to her waist.

On top of her head was a pair of black, triangular cat ears and a long black tail was coiled around her waist.

She was a person of the Mountains and Plains, another race that lived in seclusion to escape persecution from humans. She was a part of the "Blade Heart Clan", an armed group of People of the Mountains and Plains that fought the slavery and forced labor their kind endured.

About six hundred years ago, their clan had been formed by someone in a situation similar to mine. That person had gathered the persecuted people and taught them the ways of ninjutsu. Among this clan, Chiome stood as one of the six strongest ninjas.

"Okay."

When Glenys agreed, Chiome switched places with Ariane. The only weapon Chiome had were the gauntlets on her arms.

Several seconds passed as the two silently stared at each other.

Glenys behavior was completely different from before. Chiome bent down on all fours and performed a charge that was even faster than Ariane's had been. When Glenys dodged the attack, Chiome quickly regained her balance and released a flurry of attacks.

Those nimble movements were to be expected for someone with cat-like attributes. However, Glenys managed to repel the cascade of hands and feet and showed her usual smile as she began her counterattack.

The two switched between offense and defense for a while, but after Glenys landed a solid blow on the back of Chiome's ankle, she began to push Chiome back, leaving her without much room to breathe, and soon the tip of Glenys' sword was held against the ninja's neck.

"I concede....."

When Chiome admitted defeat, Glenys removed her wooden sword from her throat.

"That was very good, Chiome-chan. I'd say your martial arts skills are superior to my oldest daughter's. I'm afraid your attacks are too light because of your small body, but you're still in the middle of your growth period, so that is bound to improve."

"Th-thank you very much."

At Glenys' brief comment, the usually expressionless Chiome looked as if she were about to smile before she lowered her head.

Glenys' smile widened as she looked at that scene before she clapped

her hands and turned toward me.

“Well, let’s end practice here, grab some breakfast and prepare you for your trip!”

“Yes” “Um, understood.”

“Kyun!”

When I and Ariane stood up after answering Glenys, Ponta, who’d been idly playing near the mansion until now, ran towards us when she heard the word “Breakfast”.

She was a creature commonly referred to as a fluffy fox. Her dandelion-like tail made up half of her sixty-centimeter long body. Despite her fox-like head, there were patches between her forelegs and hind legs that were similar to the legs of a flying squirrel.

The fur on her back and head was light green, while her underbelly was covered in white colored fur that also appeared in the center of her tail.

She was a rare kind of animal that was capable of using magic, the type which the elves have dubbed spirit beasts.

According to Ariane and Chiome, spirit beasts were supposed to be wary creatures, yet there was no sign of that wariness in Ponta once she heard about breakfast.

Ponta focused her wind magic under her feet and began running on air. It looked like she was trying to reach her favorite spot on top of my helmet, but Ariane stepped forward and caught her.

“You wanna to eat too, Ponta?”

When Ariane petted her head and asked her that question in a soft voice, Ponta looked between me and her before letting out an excited cry and burying herself in Ariane’s voluptuous chest.

I was left sitting there, having been defeated by the temptation of breakfast……

Chapter 2: 「The Next Journey」

On the second floor of the elder's mansion, there was a large dining room connected to a kitchen area, and we were all siting at the wooden table in the center of that room.

Ariane and Chiome were sitting on both sides of me while Ponta was on the table, happily wagging her tail as she was buried in the meal in front of her. Ariane was petting Ponta's head as the little fox stuffed her face.

I'd taken off my armor a while ago and was currently wearing traditional elven clothing as I ate my breakfast with relish.

I noticed that Chiome was giving me a strange look, so I took a bite from a piece of bread and turned toward her.

"Is something wrong, Chiome-dono?"

When I asked her about it, Chiome's expression became confused.

"No, it's just that I've never seen an undead eating regular food as if it's natural, it's just a strange sight to see……"

Chiome stared back at me, a skeleton with a piece of bread stuffed in its mouth.

What she said was actually reasonable, considering the faint blue lights floating in my eye sockets and my lack of everything, from my skin and muscle to internal organs. However, despite all that I could still taste and swallow everything I ate.

When I came to this world in my game avatar's body, it wasn't in a human form. Instead, it was that of the special『Skeleton』skin I had been using at the time.

"Arc lacks the corruption of the undead…… Can't you tell, Chiome-chan?"

Ariane stopped petting Ponta's head for a moment and voiced a rather emotional defense of my situation to Chiome.

"The People of the Mountains and Plains have the ability to sense the

『Corruption of Death』 but I can not detect the foul scent of the undead from him……”

Chiome’s small nose twitched a little as she tilted her head to the side.

“If he were an undead, why would he have needed to take a bath after today’s training session? Do you think that mere bones could produce sweat?”

Ariane grumbled something before she gave Chiome a look that demanded her agreement.

Chiome nodded and looked up at me after mumbling something herself.

When our eyes met, I immediately looked down at my own form.

There was no way this body produced sweat, it’s just my personal habit to bathe after exercising.

Before I could start preaching the health benefits and rejuvenating effects of regular bathing had on the body and soul to Ariane, Glenys walked into the dining room with an old parchment in hand.

When she reached the table she held the parchment out to Ariane.

The parchment was made of a type of paper that wasn’t seen in human cities or villages. A map with a peculiar route plotted out was drawn on the rather thick parchment.

“This map has the route to the Dragon King’s tree drawn on it. Though you know the way through the cavern, take this just in case.”

Ariane nodded at that explanation as she took the map and we began to look over the mapped-out route.

Chiome maintained her emotionless expression as usual, but her twitching cat ears betrayed how anxious she was as she studied the map.

The Dragon King’s tree Glenys had mentioned was a rare type of tree that grew in the presence of a Dragon King. After centuries of absorbing the dragon’s essence, the tree’s spirit had been altered.

According to the village elder Dylan, even the land around the Dragon

King's tree had acquired special properties and a certain spring had gotten the ability to remove all forms of curses.

My reward for rescuing the kidnapped elves from the humans was receiving the directions to the spring, which were drawn on the map Ariane held.

After making our preparations, we'll be setting off on our Journey tomorrow.

Whether or not the effects of the spring were genuine, I questioned if it really was a curse that resulted in my skeletal body. Though it was still too early to rule anything out, it's highly possible that I'd be stuck with this body for the rest of my life. I suppose any possible solution was worth a try.

"It'd take a while to get through this cavern. I never realized just how far into the mountain range it actually spread……"

Ariane made that observation as she diligently looked over the map.

Seems that she's been through the cavern before.

"Oh, Ariane-dono have you been to the area before?"

"Yes, my elder sister took me there several times when I was still an apprentice warrior. We were able to gather a lot of magic stones to power magic tools there……"

As Ariane reminisced about her past, her eyes narrowed as if she realized something. She turned towards me and began speaking in a sing-song manner.

"If you intend to bathe here regularly, then you should be the one that collects the magic stones from now on〜"

Ariane's merciless gaze focused on me as if I were a manservant.

I was being indirectly charged for the bath's fuel expenses. Baths were a luxury in this world and they required firewood or magic stone furnaces to boil the water. If I want to enjoy baths I would have to accept her proposal.

If things went well and the curse was removed, feeling hot water on my skin again would no longer be a dream.

“Yes! I’ll be sure to collect enough magic stones to cover my bathing expenses.”

When I clenched both my fist in excitement Ariane narrowed her eyes again and let out an exasperated sign.

“Really, why do you like baths so much……”

The last bit of what Ariane was saying became inaudible as her voice trailed off.

“Well, we have some tools in the basement that will be useful for tomorrow’s journey, you’re welcome to take them.”

Ariane, Chiome and I rose from our seats when Glenys said that.

Ponta had finished her breakfast a while ago and had been cleaning her fur until now. She immediately jumped to her feet and followed us down the stairs.

The mansion’s basement entrance was hidden behind one of the support pillars on the first floor and opened up to a long spiral staircase.

Magic lamps were placed along the stairway at equal intervals, so it lacked the gloomy atmosphere of a certain feudal lord’s basement into which I had snuck previously.

When the heavy wooden door at the bottom of the stairway was opened, we were greeted with shelves crammed full of various items.

“By the way, what preparations should we make for the trip?”

While looking over the various artifacts, I asked Ariane that question, making her look away from the item she had picked up and stare at me.

“For the first part of the trip, we’re going to need this lamp.”

As she made that comment, she handed me a lamp with a handle attached to it, a lantern I think. However, there were several transparent crystals in the lantern’s glass case and there was a small switch on its

bottom.

When I flipped the switch, the crystals in the glass case began to emit a powerful beam of light. It was a magic tool befitting a fantasy world.

“Oh, this is impressive.”

“That’s a『Light Emitting Crystal Lamp』. The lamp is an elf-made magic tool, a high-quality item to say the least. Only a few wealthy humans have access to it.”

Chiome stepped forward to provide an explanation for the magic tool just when I started to make shadow puppets with it.

Given how rare it had been to see street lamps in human cities, a lamp easily comparable to a flashlight would be considered quite the luxury good. When all of this is said and done, it might be a good idea to save up some gold coins and purchase a few elf-made magic tools. However, an exclamation from behind me returned me to the present.

“Hey, are you two just going to fool around or are you going to help me?”

When I looked back I saw that Ariane was looking rather annoyed as she held two more lanterns and tossed a leather pouch to me.

“Ah, my bad.”

After apologizing and taking one of the lanterns from her, I opened the drawstrings of the pouch to find that it was filled with some kind of purple dust.

“What’s this used for?”

“『Magic Stone Fuel』, a necessity to power magic tools. Finely crushed magic stones are the most used type of fuel for elven magic tools.”

When I asked about the strange purple dust I was holding, Chiome once again stepped forward and answered.

“The elven variety of the fuel can produce an abundant amount of energy, but the technique required to stabilize it requires a lot of magic power to perform. If you use human-made fuel, it’ll damage the magic tool and extended use may even lead to the magic tool exploding.”

This stuff was like jet fuel then, and after Chiome finished her explanation Ariane proudly puffed out out her large chest for some reason.

Hearing praise for superior elven technology seems to have pleased her.

“What’s the matter, Ariane-dono?”

When I questioned Ariane about her strange behavior, she immediately returned to normal and simply said ‘It’s nothing’, before heading to a shelf in the back of the room.

While watching Ariane pick and choose items necessary for our journey, I was about to ask Chiome questions about the things Ariane was picking up when I recognized something sitting in front of a nearby shelf.

It was a sack of golden coins. I noticed it because coins were dimly reflecting the room’s lights.

When I picked one up to examine the engraved crest, I realized that this was gold from Rhoden Kingdom.

“Ah, those. That’s a fraction of the gold coins we stole from that feudal lord’s castle. Father had us set some of it aside in case you ever needed it, Arc.”

Ariane stopped selecting items for our trip and explained everything when she turned around to find me holding some of the coins.

“Well, shouldn’t this cover the fuel charges for the bath?”

When I thought I had come up with a perfect compromise, Ariane looked surprised for a moment before sighing.

“Why are you so zealous about bathing..... Arc, can’t you just hunt monsters and collect magic stones to cover the cost? Isn’t there something else you can use the money on?”

I placed my hand on my chin and thought about what she had said for a moment.

She wasn’t wrong in saying I could simply hunt monsters in the cavern we’d be passing through to cover my bathing expenses.

There was no need to spend the money on magic stones. In that case, it would be more reasonable to buy elven-made magic tools for convenience.

Fortunately, second-hand tools seem to be readily available so I should be able to live comfortably with the money..... No, even then having a proper bath in my home will be my top priority.

I made up my mind, but Ariane just let out an exasperated sigh when I told her my plans. I was quite serious about my decision, though.....

We had several more exchanges like that as our preparations steadily advanced.

Chapter 3: 「Is This What They Call Damage?」

The next morning, Ariane lead Chiome and me into the fog-blanketed forest with baggage over our shoulders and Ponta sitting on my helmet.

The morning light was filtering through the tree branches and continued to illuminate the foliage-laden forest path.

A thin layer of haze covered the landscape, making it difficult to grasp our location from visual markers alone.

However, Ariane traversed this natural maze without hesitation as if it were a familiar mountain trail.

Once the magic-obstructing fog cleared, we would able to use transfer magic and reach the fork between the Rydell and Riburute rivers before noon.

Then we just had to cross the river with【Dimensional Step】.

When we reached that location, I made sure to completely memorize the scenery where the rivers split off as we took our break.

I had to lower my head back in Raratoia when I told Ariane that we couldn't use my long distance transfer magic,【Transfer Gate】, to return here because I failed to memorize it when we were here before.

Without minding my personal grief, our group reached the Rydell riverbank.

The forest on the opposite bank had a radically different atmosphere than Great Canada Forest.

Despite how dense and lush it was.

We would kill the occasional monsters that popped up while we used transfer magic to cover an impressive amount of distance. As the ground began to rise, the path we were traveling along took on a slight incline and the trees' shadows started to cover the area as the sky took on the colors of dusk.

“We made spectacular progress thanks to Arc’s transfer magic. Let’s stay here tonight.”

Ariane began cutting off low hanging branches that was blocking our way with her sword while I took in the scenery.

The clearing she lead us to had a three huge trees that had a large, nest-like object nestled between their branches ten meters above the ground.

It was a rather unnatural thing to see in this place.

There were support beams on each of the trees below the observation deck.

“Huh, what..... is that?”

“Kyun!”

When I asked Ariane about the baffling structures, Ponta happily used her wind magic to fly to one of the observation decks.

I couldn’t see Ponta anymore once she landed on the top of the deck.

“This is a rest area that we elves have made. There are multiple sites like this scattered throughout the forest for warriors to stay while hunting monsters.”

I suppose people could rest here without having to worry about the monsters that roam the forest floor. However, while I could simply use transfer magic to reach the structure, normal people would have to climb to the top. A difficult task to accomplish while carrying baggage.

If I were going to spend an extended amount of time outdoors, I’d be sure to bring a backpack full of necessary equipment.

“Elves are quite impressive. To establish such a place in the middle of this forest.....”

Chiome voiced her admiration as she looked up at the observation decks.

For a brief moment, Ariane smiled and puffed out her chest, but then her expression became clouded.

“There used to be a few small villages along the river around here, so the local warriors often used this place, but when the humans’ elf hunts increased, the villages this side of the river had to be relocated.”

After Ariane had finished speaking, Chiome looked up at her face that was obscured by the growing shadows.

Ariane shook her head to remove her bleak expression and tried to laugh it off as she approached one of the trees and grabbed hold of some ivy vines that were wrapped around its trunk.

“The sun will be setting soon, we need to climb to the top and set up camp before then.”

After rearranging her the baggage, Ariane used the ivy vines and the hollow to literally run up the tree trunk.

“Alright.”

Chiome followed after Ariane by kicking off the tree trunks to climb up.

I doubted I’d be able to copy their climbing methods.

So I stepped back from the trees until I reached a point where I could transfer to the top of the observation deck with【Dimensional Step】.

The two of them were already rummaging through their bags for their camping gear.

Ponta was peeking over the deck’s edge at the forest floor below. She seemed to be comfortable in her natural habitat.

The deck was covered with short grass and it didn’t move an inch even with all of us moving about. The base of the terraces was intertwined with the branches and I couldn’t find any uneven sections either.

At the center platform there was a stone pedestal set up for a fire pit to be lit.

While Ariane and Chiome began gathering twigs to build up a fire, I sat my baggage down and called out to the two of them.

“Ariane-dono, since this is a rather unique and memorable location I,

we could return to the village and come back tomorrow……”

I found that difficult to say when they had gone through the trouble of preparing the camp, but Ariane didn’t seem practically upset when she looked back at me.

“That is an option, but what if you visit other rest areas that look just like this one? No offense, Arc, but I doubt you could distinguish this location from the others.”

“Ye〜ah……”

“Camp set up is almost complete anyway. Since we’re gonna be camping for several days, it’s best that you get used to it. How you ever been camping before Arc?”

“……Yes.”

I did have experience camping, but there weren’t any heat-retention sleeping bags, sturdy tents, or kerosene stoves on this trip.

In a sense, this might be my first true camping experience.

Besides, I thought that familiarizing myself with camping on this trip would be beneficial in the future.

Just as Ariane had said, if I used similar rest areas in the future, I wouldn’t be able to distinguish them from each other and I’d be more likely to transfer here since I’d seen this one first.

I’ve been told the reason my sense of direction was so terrible was because I had difficulties leaving strong impressions of my surroundings in my brain. If I relied on long-distance transfer magic, I ‘d never be able to tell these rest areas apart.

When I thought about it,【Transfer Gate】was a spell quite fitting for myself.

Relenting to Ariane’s suggestion, I asked the two of them if there was anything I could help with, but they turned me away saying they hadn’t done much of anything today.

With nothing else to do, I walked over to where Ponta had been laying

on the grassy ground and sat near the edge to watch the two work.

Ariane reached into her knapsack and pulled out a large, folded cloth. After tightly tying a rope between two of the trees she threw the cloth over the rope and pinned its four corners to the desk with pegs.

She had set up a triangular roof tent.

The top half of the fabric was dyed green with a type of luster that was meant to keep out the rain.

Chiome, on the other hand, had started pulling out cooking utensils and dry ingredients from a bag Ariane had given her, the variety of which caused her to cry out.

"I'm amazed that we brought this much..... Usually, we don't make such extensive preparations for camping because heavier loads slow down our pace."

"Since elven warriors often have to pull long patrols, or cull large amounts of monsters, it's normal to pack excess supplies. Since we have Arc's transfer magic, we actually packed less than normal because we'll probably reach the 'Dragon Valley' by tomorrow."

Ariane placed several pelts inside the tent while she replied before moving towards the pile of twigs and setting it alight with spirit magic.

After receiving a pot from Chiome, Ariane placed it on the fire pit, filled it with water from a canteen and started to cook once the pot started boiling.

"What's the 'Dragon Valley'?"

I had been skillfully running my fingers though Ponta's fur while the two of them worked, so I asked Ariane about the unfamiliar term she used.

"The Dragon Valley is the huge canyon between the Wind, Ice and Fire Mountain Ranges. The entrance into the valley is just beyond the cavern we're heading to."

"Hoo, so we're going to enter the Dragon Valley by tomorrow then?"

Ariane shook her head when I hazarded a guess about our schedule.

"At our current pace, we should reach the valley in the afternoon at the earliest. Since the cavern is home to a variety of monsters, it'll take a while to pass through it. That's why I think we'll need to camp out again before entering the cavern."

I understood, if we entered the cavern early in the morning we'd be able to clear it in one fell swoop.

It seemed consecutive camp outs were unavoidable. Towns and villages weren't built in regulars interval in this forest.

Ariane had been stirring the soup she'd been cooking with a wooden spoon while going over tomorrow's plans, and after a taste test she added a dash of seasoning.

The sound of the firewood crackling and the flames rising in the night stood out the most in this quiet forest scenery.

A sweet fragrance drifted from the pot as the soup began to simmer, a fragrance that caused Ponta to start twitching on my knee.

"Kyun!"

"It'll be ready soon."

Ariane took out some metal mugs she had also brought along and begun dividing the soup amongst them. Chiome reached into her knapsack and took out some fried bread sticks before passing them around.

Since I hadn't thought that a warm full course meal would be prepared, I accepted the bread and soup in defeat.

Ponta was also staring at my soup with such an intensity that I was starting to get worried.

Once Ariane poured some soup into a plate specially brought for Ponta, the little fox happily wagged her tail and leaped at it.

"We'll take shifts during the night watch: Chiome first, Arc second and me last. Are you guys alright with that?"

Ariane smiled as she watched Ponta cooling her soup with her magic and suggested the guard order. Chiome and I shared a look before nodding in agreement.

"I don't mind."

"I'm alright with it as well."

"Arc, will you be fine using this to sleep?"

When she accepted Chiome's and my agreement, she picked up one of the pelts she'd placed in the tent for me to check out.

Apparently, the pelt was supposed to be wrapped around one's body as they slept, a type of primitive sleeping bag if you will. The problem was that the pelt wouldn't have any effect on me thanks to my armor and I was reluctant to remove it in this place..... so I decided against using it.

After dinner, we began our sleep rotation and even though I was a little nervous about having two ladies close to me..... I eventually managed to doze off as the night passed by.

"Gah!?"

The next morning, I felt a shock run through my body and the slight pain caused me to bolt up.

When I looked around in a daze, I saw that the forest was covered by a thick fog and that the three large trees were behind me.

"Hey, Arc!? Are you alright!?"

"Kyun!"

When I suddenly heard a woman's voice above me, I looked up to find Ariane, Chiome and Ponta looking down on me with worried looks on their faces.

Apparently I fell down from the observation deck.

I only remember sitting down in the corner after changing shifts with Chiome.

"Don't worry, I'm okay."

“Are you sure about that? Didn’t you just fall from a great height?”

Ariane slowly climbed down the tree trunk and approached me with a concerned look in her eyes.

Rather than reply, I stood up and brushed it off as if it were nothing.

“What the hell is up with your body? You’re not indestructible are you?”

Though she looked rather surprised, there was a tinge of relief in her voice.

I wasn’t quite indestructible, I could still feel pain from nasty hits after all.

However, I wondered if a ten-meter fall was supposed to cause only a little soreness in someone’s body. Wait a minute, it was rather pitiful that the first amount of damage I received in this world came from falling out of a tree!

For the time being, I used recovery magic on myself as a precaution and then answered her.

“I’ll try to sleep closer to the center next time……”

“I see. I thought it was something like that.”

After receiving a scolding from Ariane, we returned to the observation deck, had our breakfast and set off

The monsters we came across were no problem to deal with, but since I kept stopping to harvest their magic stones we reached our destination around noon

The trees of the densely packed forest had given way to the spectacle in front of us.

An overwhelming landscape opened up before my eyes.

The earth had opened below this cliff to reveal a lush and sprawling valley covered in thick mist. The opposite end of the valley laid at a far-off distance and two towering mountain ranges in the east and west acted as the boundary. The Wind Dragon Mountain Range sat in the east and

the Fire Dragon Mountain Range in the west.

A forest rested at the bottom of the valley and the thousand or so meter drop from here to the ground floor seemed impossible to survive. It was as if a chunk of the world had been taken out.

Once a normal breeze made its way up the cliff, it had grown into a large gale. The updraft nearly blew the tiny Ponta away.

“This is the ‘Dragon Valley’, huh..... Quite the spectacular scenery.”

“..... It certainly is impressive, but it’s also impossible for me to safely get down there from here.”

I regret to say that even someone like me would struggle to descend such a height. No, I’d certainly die. It was a hundred times higher than the light fall I had this morning.

While Chiome and I had been timidly staring over the edge, expressing our opinions, Ariane urged us now from behind.

“The cavern is just east of here, along the cliff face. We’ll have to keep a lookout for the occasional Wyvern that flies by.”

Ariane began moving again and the two of us hurried to keep up. After about an hour of traversing the forest with【Dimensional Step】, we came across a similar rest area to the one from this morning close by the valley.

The observation deck in the center of the trees was slightly lower, maybe only seven or eight meters off the ground. Apart from how close this one was to Dragon Valley, there wasn’t much difference between the sites.

Since it was close to the cavern entrance, we’d spend the night here and then rush through the cavern early tomorrow morning.

On the second night of camping, I slept closer to the center to prevent myself from falling off again.

Chapter 4: 「I Have A Bad Feeling」

The next morning, the shadow of the Wind Dragon Mountains blocked the sunlight from reaching us as we quickly finished our breakfast and headed towards the Dragon Valley.

We were now scaling down the cliff from yesterday on a path that was barely wide enough for one person to pass at a time.

The mist that had blanketed the forest floor was pouring into the valley like a river, and the forest that had been visible yesterday was now lost in a sea of mist. The literal mist-sea was constantly pulsing and shifting with its own unique currents and tides.

Every once in a while, a strong breeze would blow a wave of mist up the cliff face like a spray of water.

It wasn't possible for me to walk straight along the path while wearing my armor, so I had to cling to the wall as I walked. Since it'd be bad if Ponta got caught in the wind currents, she was safely settled in Ariane's cleavage, though I couldn't see her because I was bringing up the rear.

The『Overcoat of the Night Sky』fluttered in the wind as I carefully traversed the path until we came upon the cavern's entrance.

The cavern entrance was about fifty meters beneath the cliff and appeared to be a gaping hole that led into a dark abyss.

Since the pathway had widened in front of the cavern, we took a short break that gave me enough time to examine it.

The entrance itself was considerably large, about five meters in height, and was even wider than that. The ledge in front of the cavern was covered in moss leading into the abyss.

"Since a variety of monsters inhabit the cavern we need to proceed with caution."

Ariane took out the crystal lamp from her knapsack after she said that and turning it on and shined light into the dark cavern.

Chiome and I followed suit and took out our own crystal lamps. The stronger light sources managed to illuminate some of the cavern.

However, darkness still remained in the depths of the cavern and seemed impenetrable from here.

It'd be impossible to cover any meaningful distance with【Dimensional Step】in this place.

With a crystal lamp in hand, Ariane led the way into the cavern, while I brought up the rear.

A chilly wind would blow up from deeper in the cavern and the only sounds that could be heard were the eerie sounds of our echoing footsteps.

The descending route into the cavern was rather extensive, several branching paths opened up along the way, yet Ariane remained steadfast in her advance and paid them no mind.

When I looked back I saw that the entrance was no longer visible.

"You said that this place was inhabited by monsters, but we haven't seen any yet……"

I moved my lamp to peer into the darkness after I said that.

All of a sudden Ponta, who was sitting on Ariane's shoulder, let out a cry just as Ariane drew her sword.

"Kyun!"

"Giant Bats!"

At Ariane's shout, I looked ahead of her to find a one-meter tall, large bat hanging from the ceiling with its full two-meter long wingspan on display. The bat's ears looked like fish gills and when it bared its fangs and let out a strange cry, dozens more of them attacked from the ceiling.

The bats flew in strange patterns and screeched above Ariane's and Chiome's heads with their fangs bared

The bats were completely focused on those two and paid me no mind.

“They’re really annoying in large numbers!”

“Kyuhyun!”

Ariane expertly killed one of the bats as it tried to attack her from the side. Ponta was unusually motivated about this fight, even participating by creating a small whirlwind around Ariane that threw off the bats’ flight patterns.

The instant a bat faltered, Ariane would cut into it with her sword. Thanks to Ponta’s intervention, the threat of individual bats wasn’t all that high.

『Water ninjutsu: Water shuriken!!』

Behind Ariane, Chiome began shooting down the bats that had been hanging back with the water shuriken she was able to create.

I was completely left alone by the bats, so I was using my large sword to cut down any bat that tried to attack the two of them from behind.

Since they were flying around in irregular patterns I doubted I could hit them with a magic attack. Taking advantage of my incredible kinetic vision, I reduced the bats to corpses.

However, despite my sword’s size, it couldn’t reach the bats higher up in the air.

While glaring at the bats in the air, I remembered a technique I had used to kill a bandit before.

“【Flying Dragon Slash】!”

Some of the bats flying in the air were bisected and fell to the ground when they were struck by an invisible slash created by the technique.

While it was an excellent midrange technique, it was quite difficult to use since my allies couldn’t see the slash either. In other words, it was basically useless for supporting my friends.

After I continued to fire off【Flying Dragon Slash】towards the ceiling for a bit, the bats scattered once their numbers had dwindled enough.

“Hmm〜, were those monsters? For some reason, they didn’t seem to notice me……”

I sheathed my sword and took a look around before picking my knapsack back up. The bat corpses were littering the area in small mounds.

“They weren’t monsters, just common animals. Since they suck the blood of their prey, someone like you wouldn’t be considered food, Arc.”

After wiping the blood from her sword, Ariane turned to me and gave me the explanation about the giant bats’ behavior.

My whole body was completely covered in metal body armor and there wasn’t any moisture in my bones, so it was understandable that they wouldn’t consider me prey.

I guess they could have determined that much with their echolocation.

When I looked back at Chiome, I saw that she had picked up one of the fallen giant bats and was examining its wing.

“Chiome-dono, is everything alright?”

“Everything is fine. By the way, are these things edible? I have eaten a smaller version of these before, so I’m curious……”

I was left in a daze when Chiome asked me that question while holding up a headless giant bat.

If I wasn’t mistaken, there were a couple of places on earth where eating bats was a common occurrence, and she had eaten them before.

Since the People of the Plains and Mountains were a persecuted race, it wouldn’t be all that surprising if large-scale agriculture or cattle raising were impossible and eating anything edible was an acceptable practice.

However, the giant bat’s pig-and-mouse chimera face, gill-like ears and large fangs made it look anything but appetizing.

When I turned to Ariane, she nodded her head in sympathy before answering.

“We don’t usually eat them. Given their appearance and all……”

Ariane agreed with my opinion.

“Anyway, if we don’t hurry we won’t be able to leave this place tonight.”

After her brief statement, Ariane held up her lamp and resumed her trek into the cavern.

“You’re right, sorry.”

Chiome nodded as she quietly tossed the giant bat she’d been holding aside before following Ariane with a slightly depressed expression.

As we continued or trek into the dark cavern, we came across one-meter long ghost millipedes crawling along the walls, a gathering of the game’s small fries monster slimes and avoided monsters hidden deeper in the shadows that caused chills to run up our spines.

I also began to hear strange voices that originated from somewhere from just beyond the light’s range. This skeleton body might’ve been be the only reason I was able to maintain my cool

Then an unknown monster drifted into my line of sight.

“Ariane-dono, what is that creature?”

It drifted in the air like a balloon, it’s spherical and seemingly soft body was covered in eyes, and several tentacles hung from its body.

The monster looked like a flying jellyfish, honestly.

More and more of them became visible as we advanced. Ariane managed to catch my hand before I drew my sword and attacked one that came too close to me.

“That is a ‘Spoil’, it will just float by if you don’t bother it. When you attack them, they will release poison instead of fighting back.”

She said that they just floated around and when I took a close look at the tentacles of the Spoils I saw that they would occasionally catch a flying beetle to eat.

Several of the creatures’ eyes surveyed the environment at all times, but

the scene of the creature preying on insects was rather chilling to watch.

While doing our best to avoid the Spoils as we moved beyond them, Chiome called out a warning.

“Ariane-dono, there’s an unpleasant smell up ahead. It’s most likely an undead.”

At her warning, Ariane stopped walking and held out her crystal lamp deeper into the depths.

Unfortunately, the light wasn’t able to reach that far back, but a gust of wind carried along the sound of something limping. A humanoid shape soon crawled out of the darkness.

“A zombie……?”

The body that crawled towards us on its hand and feet had discolored, dark brown skin and vacant eyes. Also, there were strange worms squirming around in its limbs and body.

When It managed to stand up, I could see that a large worm was resting in a cavity that had been opened in its chest. It moved like a sea anemone that had just found it’s prey.

“That!? It’s not a Zombie, it’s a Ghoul Worm!!”

Ariane’s panicked voice echoed throughout the cavern as more ghoul worms appeared from the shadows and launched themselves at us.

“They jump!?”

The creatures leaped outside of the light that the crystal lamp gave off and carried enough momentum to reach me.

I took a step back in order to dodge and proceeded to put down my lamp before drawing my sword.

In this dark area, the range in which I could fight was limited to the area illuminated by the light. Ariane and Chiome both possessed nightvision, so they were fine fighting in the dark, but my light-dependent self was left as an easy target.

I dodged several of the ghoul worms that leaped at me from the shadows and was about to cut them down when a nearby Spoil caused me to halt my swing.

While wielding a greatsword was advantageous when fighting multiple enemies, it was a hindrance in narrow spaces. If you added something that you weren't supposed to touch into the mix, then the weapon was rendered nearly useless.

Even though Ariane wielded a longsword, I doubted I could replicate her ability to avoid the Spoils and safely cut into the ghoul worms.

"【Sword of Judgment】!"

Shortly after the Ghoul Worms had landed, I invoked the Paladin skill I had once used to kill a Giant Basilisk.

My sword shined a radiant light as I swung it down in front of me. Instantly, a magic circle formed under a Ghoul Worm's feet before a sword of light fell from the ceiling. However, the Ghoul Worm managed to jump out of the way before the sword could hit.

It was quite difficult to aim at a human body with the ability to leap about like a giant grasshopper. My target wasn't the size of a Giant Basilisk and it was agile enough to easily dodge【Sword of Judgment】.

I immediately gave up on using my sword in this fight and sheathed it before picking up my lamp and pointing it at Ariane.

"I'm going to gather these pests together!【Whirlwind】!!"

"Huh, Arc!?"

Ariane shouting my name in surprise as I invoked a wind attribute magic spell of the magician class.

With me at it's center, a fierce gale began blowing throughout the cavern and traveled in the direction of my outstretched hand.

The Spoils that had been floating in the air were blown deeper into the cavern. The Ghoul Worms, on the other hand, were blown off balance by the strong gale.

Without giving them time to recover, I invoked another spell.

“【Stone Fangs】!!”

Rock spikes formed from hard bedrock burst from the ground and skewered the cluster of Ghoul Worms before they had any chance to leap out of the way.

The skewered Ghoul Worms’ movement had clearly been dulled, but they still struggled to get free.

It seemed like this wasn’t enough to kill them, when I turned to Ariane and Chiome to tell them that, Ariane raised her voice again.

“Wait a second, Arc! You’re not supposed to use earth magic in caves because it affect—!!”

I heard a bit of anxiety in Ariane’s voice, but she was soon cut off by a sudden loud thud.

The ground beneath my feet suddenly collapsed into a large fissure that swallowed me whole.

“Nuuooooo!?”

My view radically changed as I continued to fall. When I noticed a small hole on my left as I fell down this endless roller coaster I somehow managed to roll into it.

Now I knew how Indiana Jones felt when he fell into traps.

“Because earth magic affects the ground, it’s a bad idea to recklessly use it in caves!”

When I looked back up at where I fell from, I saw Ariane and Chiome climbing down the wall towards me.

The two of them seemed to have been caught in the collapse as well. Ponta was even clinging to Ariane’s chest for safety.

It was my fault for not accounting for the effect earth magic would have on the topography, so I sincerely apologized.

“Sorry! Let’s find a place to stand and then use transfer magic to get out

of here!”

I had managed to maintain my grasp on my crystal lamp and it still emitted light, so I began searching around for it.

There were a couple of rocks sticking out here and there but there weren’t enough to hinder us as we slid down the tunnel.

After a while, the dark, narrow hole gave way to an open area.

The slope we’d been sliding down evened out, allowing us to slow down and take a look around the room.

Despite this place being located deep underground in a cavern, a dim, bluish light illuminated the area and revealed a location befitting of a fantasy world.

“There’s a subterranean lake here. And that’s……!?”

When I heard Chiome speak up, I focused a bit more on our surrounding and found that most of the ground was covered by clear water. The things that illuminated this underground lake and created this mysterious scenery were pale lights that could be seen all around us.

But most shocking of all was the huge ship that was anchored near the lakefront despite this being an underground lake.

Chapter 5: 「The Trip Underground」 Part 1

I slowly stood up in order to get a better look at the strange sight we found ourselves in. The ceiling was about one hundred meters above our heads.

There were light emitting crystals scattered about the cave that illuminated the whole area.

The lake that rested in the cave was so vast that I couldn't even see its opposite shore. Halfway along the nearby wall, there was a considerably large opening from which water was pouring into the lake.

The water that filled the lake was crystal clear and reflected the one man-made structure located in this fantastic underground scenery.

There was a simple wooden pier next to the lake with a huge ship anchored to it.

The ship was the only thing there and resembled a three-masted galleon, I could see multiple oars resting slightly above the waterline.

If such a ship could be found in this underground lake, it could only mean that this place was connected to the surface.

"For there to be naturally occurring light emitting crystal here……"

"Kyun!"

After Ariane stood up, she approached a wall studded with crystal and voiced her admiration. Ponta also peeked out of Ariane's bosom and began to look around on her own.

"Judging from the pier and ship, it's clear that humans have been here."

Chiome had done her own investigation before she focused on the ship.

"But how did they manage to reach such a place?"

As Chiome looked in confusion at the man-made pier that just didn't belong here, Ariane picked up a nearby stone and showed it to us.

"This might have something to do with it……"

When she turned the stone over it emitted a slightly pale, purple light from its crystalline form.

“Magic stones.”

Chiome’s eyes widened when she saw the purple light emitting stone.

“High-purity magic stones are scattered all around this place. That’s how the naturally formed light crystals maintain their power.”

The light emitting crystals around us worked the same way as the ones in my lamp.

I held up my lamp to get a better look at the crystals inside it.

“Are you sure these crystals are the same thing?”

“The crystals in the lamps were created artificially. The expensive natural crystals would never be used in camping gear.”

The lamp in my hand, the one Chiome had called a rather expensive commodity for humans, was a cheap item according to her.

If that was true then the crystals in this place would be a literal gold mine.

The magic stone could also be used by the elves to make fuel for magic tools. The innumerable uses for the stones casually lying at my feet came to mind.

“With the magic stones alone, I could bath for a year straight without worry!”

Ariane had a bitter smile when she heard my comment, but then she stroked her chin and took another look around as she started speaking.

“With the number of resources here, I’ll need to inform father about it. We may need to have a team of warriors investigate later……”

“It appears to me that we should look into those who reside here before we proceed……”

Chiome returned her suspicious gaze to the nearby ship and voiced her opinion to Ariane.

Ariane and I both turned to the ship when she said that.

Given its present condition, it was obvious that someone was maintaining it. The ship didn't appear to have been abandoned, and if anything it seemed like it could set sail at any moment.

However, I couldn't see anyone around the ship. I couldn't hear the sound of anyone moving about, only the sound of the far-off waterfall.

It might be necessary to board the ship in order to investigate its owner.

"For now, how about we just check out the ship?"

When I turned away from the probably haunted ship to look at Ariane and Chiome as the two of them nodded at my suggestion.

The three of us, and our little fox, walked up to the side of the ship.

The full length of the ship, from bowsprit to stern, was about sixty meters and from the main mast to waterline it was thirty meters tall. There was also a platform leading up to the ship's deck.

Ariane seemed rather anxious as she looked up at the ship.

"There's no sign of anyone here……"

When we made our way up to the deck, I saw that the large double doors leading to the main hold were left open. In addition, there were four cannons on each side of the deck, the stern of the ship was higher than the main deck and equipped with ship lanterns.

While I wondered if the ships in this world already came equipped with cannons, Ariane stepped forward and shouted once she saw them.

"Are those mana cannons!? What are these doing here!?"

A confused Chiome asked Ariane just what she was talking about.

"Ariane-dono, what are mana cannons?"

"It's a type of magic tool that can shoot metal balls over incredible distances by consuming mana. Only the elves of Great Canada forest or the Fabuna'ha kingdom of the southern continent should have access to them…… I haven't heard anything about human kingdoms acquiring

them.”

Ariane glanced at the cannons fixed to the side of the deck as she spoke.

I didn’t remember seeing any ships equipped with cannons in the Rhoden Kingdom’s harbor city Lanbaltic when I went on a bit of a rampage there.

“Then, if this ship isn’t from the same group of elves Ariane-dono is from, could it belong to the Fabuna’ha kingdom?”

Though it was a logical conclusion, Ariane crossed her arms and shook her head at my question.

“This ship isn’t designed like elven vessels, and there is no proof that it’s a Fabuna’ha ship..... it seems different from the ones I’ve seen before.”

Ariane had started brushing the barrel of one of the cannons as she spoke.

“Where in the world did this ship——”

“Kyun! Kyun!”

“There’s something coming from below deck.....!”

Before Ariane could finish her question, Ponta suddenly let out a cry as she buried herself into Ariane’s chest and Chiome’s ears perked up as she called our attention to what was happening.

The next moment, the doors leading to the ship’s deck were forcefully thrown open and a large number of sword-wielding skeletons attacked us.

“Huh!? Is this entire place infested with these things!?”

Only the sounds from rattling bones and clanging swords could be heard as skeletons similar to myself silently sprung from below deck and swarmed us.

“These are just ordinary undead skeletons! If they were as strong as Arc, countries would fall if such a large number of them existed!!”

Ariane made a rather rude comment as she set her sword ablaze and

struck the knees of the approaching skeletons. Splendidly dodging their attacks, Chiome proceeded to shatter the skeleton's bones with roundhouse kicks.

Myself, I drew the『Sword of Holy Thunder』and began smashing the skeletons with the flat side of the blade.

Since the blade of the『Sword of Holy Thunder』was so wide, it shattered the skulls of the skeletons with a dry sound as more and more skeletons moved above deck.

"This ship already belongs to the undead! The simplest method to get rid of them would be to set the whole thing ablaze!"

Chiome proposed destroying the ship as she continued to knock skeletons away. Ariane then shouted her agreement to the idea.

"Yeah! There're too many of them, once I set it on fire we need to jump over——!!?"

While Ariane tried to answer as she knocked away another bunch of skeletons, her voice trailed off when she noticed something.

All of a sudden, the skeletons that had been crawling up from below deck were blown away as a single large body emerged.

『Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!』

Unlike the skeletons before it, this humanoid monster was covered in patches of discolored skin.

It was taller than even me, standing around three meters tall. It wore a chest plate on its muscular upper body, a body that seems to be composed of two torsos fused together. Both sets of arms held a sword and a lump of metal that seemed to be a shield. And the creature's lower body was that of a giant spider.

The creature had two human heads beside each other on its neck, each head had a mouth full of fangs capable of ripping flesh from bone and topping everything off were the four and five eyes the heads had respectively.

The chimera spider released a bone-chilling roar before it agilely moved it's spider legs through the crowd of skeletons to go where we were fighting.

When they saw the monster approaching Ariane's and Chiome's eyes bulged in shock and horror.

"What..... is that thing!? It's clad in death's taint, so it's an undead as well!?"

Judging from Ariane's tone, she didn't know what the undead creature was. When I turned towards Chiome it was clear that she didn't know either.

Of course, this was a monster that I'd never seen before, not even in the game.

When it was near enough, the creatures glared at us before opening it mouths and spit out some coherent sentences.

『Kill..... all intruders!! Moku kill them all!! Kill everyone!!!』

When it's scratchy voice boomed through the area, the creature's spider legs quickly extended as it flung itself into the sky with its weapons raised high.

Chapter 6: 「The Trip Underground」 Part 2

“An undead spoke words!?”

“It appears to be different from low-level undead like skeletons!”

Ariane and Chiome dodged the chimera’s attack by leaping back and tried to make sense of the speaking undead monster.

I, on the other hand, had grabbed the shield from my back and blocked one of the chimera’s strikes. The considerable shock that ran through my arm showed my opponent’s impressive physical strength.

When I used the『Sword of Holy Thunder』in my other hand to launch a counterattack, the Spider Chimera moved its humanoid body to block my attack with one of the chunks of metal it used as shield. The collision of the two items created a large sonic boom.

“It was repelled!?”

Until now, everything that I attacked with this sword was killed in a single blow, but I only felt a slight impact as the Spider Chimera was knocked back.

『—Molten stone, pierce through my enemies—』

When the chimera was staggered after my attack, Ariane used her spirit magic to launch an attack of her own against it. However, the chimera managed to raise its shields to defend itself and when the flames hit the shield they immediately vanished.

“A mithril shield!?”

Ariane glared at the Spider Chimera in disbelief.

In this fantasy world, mithril ore was a precious raw material. For a monster of seemingly low intelligence to possess it, along with the set of knight armor it currently wore, could only me one thing..... someone has given the chimera these items.

Given what the monster had said before, someone was obviously pulling its strings.

The Spider Chimera used our moment of surprise as an opportunity to attack. The monster charged at Ariane with the intention of taking full advantage of its large size and impressive strength.

Despite its large frame, the monster's spider legs made it quite agile.

While Ariane managed to dodge the blow, the chimera's attack crushed a couple of nearby skeletons before hitting the deck.

"【Flame】!!"

Just as the chimera was about to pursue Ariane, I hit it with an beginner-level magic that was easier to control.

The pillar of flame that shot from my hand as if it were a flame thrower managed to incinerate some skeletons, the chimera raised its shield to disperse some of the flames and leaped backward to avoid the rest.

Even though the flames didn't do any damage to the chimera, they were enough to set the ship on fire.

As embers started to flare up, the tranquil cave was soon filled with the sound of burning wood, smoke and orange lights.

"It'll be too dangerous to fight on board! Return to the lakefront, quickly!"

Chiome, who'd been fighting off the skeletons until now, called out to Ariane and me before heading back down to the pier.

As if instinctively, Ariane and I shared a passing glance and she nodded back at me when I yelled my intentions.

"I'll guard the rear! Chiome-dono and Ariane-dono leave first!!"

The chimera in front of us had erupted in a rage-filled roar when it saw the ship being consumed by the flames.

「Hindrances, I kill yoooouuuu!!!」

As its two human heads bellowed, the chimera raised its weapons to attack.

Ariane and Chiome had weaved their way through the crowd of

skeletons back to the pier and were probably preparing to fight the chimera on the ground.

However, I intended to kill this thing here and now.

That's why I had Ariane and Chiome leave the narrow confines of the ship. Since the majority of my skills and spells had large areas of effect and firepower, I was hesitant to use them unless I was fighting alone.

While the skill I was gonna use was fine in the game, it was something quite difficult to use in group fights in real life.

"【Sacred Lightning Sword】!!"*

In the game, only mythical grade weapons had weapon skills..... though it's unknown if the temporary status debuff carried over into reality, it should still be a considerably powerful ability.

My sword's blade shined in a deep blue color as it more than doubled its length and an electric aura wrapped around it.

The skill's effects in the game were an increase of 10% in offensive power, inflicting low-level paralysis on targets and increasing the sword's range.

There weren't any visual cues for the sword's extended range in the game, but in this world, there was a brutally obvious one.

When I lightly swung the『Sword of Holy Thunder』the skeletons in the vicinity were vaporized by the sword's aura and the nearby mast was cut off.

A common nickname for this skill was 'lightsaber mode'.

The broken mast fell into the water with a huge splash.

「AGahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!」

The Spider Chimera roared again as it started flailing its weapons.

"I'll show you the power of the force!!"

I held the bluish white sword up as I stared down the chimera.

The creature leapt into the air and brought its swords down with a full

force swing. There was certainly power behind the move, but it was child's play compared to Glenys' attacks.

Even if it had four arms, only two of them were holding swords. I used my lighting clad sword to cut off the lower sword arm and then stabbed my blade into its chest.

「Gyhaaaaaaaaa!!?」

The monster let out an agonized cry as half of its torso vanished. I followed up on the thrust by cutting the remains of the human upper body from the spider lower body.

The chimera's main body managed to raise its two shields to defend against my next attack. While the sword temporarily reverted to its original form on contact, it quickly returned to its powered form and the recoil was large enough to cut a section out of the ship.

「OOOOOOOOO……!」

The Spider Chimera squeezed out a rueful cry as it's flesh began to bubble and melt away.

I didn't care all that much as the creature dissolved in front of me…… but as I started to walk away, a huge explosion blew out one of the ship's sides. The shock could be felt from beneath my feet and the first explosion seems to have triggered smaller ones.

Something stored in this ship had caught fire and this vessel wouldn't last much longer.

I used【Dimensional Step】to move to the pier and slowly walked away as multiple explosions went off on the ship.

Just as I was imagining how I might look recreating that one action movie scene, the pier I was walking on began to creak.

When I looked back, I saw that the multiple explosions had sunk the ship and that the pier was following close behind.

"Oh no, nononononono."

As I ran towards the solid ground I noticed that the『Sword of Holy

Thunder』was cutting into the pier. In order to prevent my elongated sword from tearing into the pier even further, I had to awkwardly hold it up as I ran.

I somehow reached land just before the last section of the pier sank into the water. Wondering if my mistake had been seen by the others, I quickly looked around for them.

If I had been more level headed, I could have simply used transfer magic to get off the pier, but for some reason I had wanted to show off after my victory.

As I scratched my head and felt a sudden tightness in my chest, sounds of a battle came from behind a large bolder, making me rush towards it once my sword returned to normal.

When I reached the area, I found Ariane and Chiome fending off a group of skeletons and another Spider Chimera.

I unintentionally looked back where the ship had sunk before returning my gaze to the chimera.

The creature's appearance and armor wasn't all that different from the other one, but it carried four large pickaxes in its humanoid hands instead of swords and shields.

This one had probably been hidden away somewhere before now, but Ariane and Chiome seemed to be holding their own against it. Unlike the other chimera, this one lacked mithril shields, allowing Ariane to drop back and shoot fireballs at it with her spirit magic.

Chiome managed to sneak into the chimera's blind spot and cut off one of the spider legs with a water dagger before retreating back.

The Chimera released a pained shriek as it turned around to attacked whatever injured it. This proved to be fatal, as Ariane ran up to the distracted chimera and ran her flame clad sword through its back. Having lost its strength, the chimera's body fell to the ground and began to dissolve like the other one.

Simultaneously with the chimera's death, the remaining skeletons became disordered.The coordinated unit they had been previously was reduced to an incoherent mob. Apparently, the chimeras had been controlling the skeletons all along.

I called out to the two of them just as they finished cutting down the nearby mindless skeletons.

"So there were two of those monsters."

“It and a horde of skeletons appeared from the waterfall not long after we got off the ship.”

Ariane spoke up after wiping the dirt from her sword and sheathing it.

“The lower half of its body was rather tough. I would’ve been quite difficult to injure the creature with a regular dagger.”

While keeping an eye on the melting Spider Chimera, Chiome ran her finger over her regular dagger to check for nicks in the blade.

“I have no idea what they were, but we seem to have dealt with them just fine.”

I dropped my eye towards some nearby skeletal remains. The skeletons here didn’t carry any weapons like the ones that had been on the ship, they had had collection baskets on their backs instead.

The battle had scattered the contents of the baskets all over the ground. A quick look revealed the items to be magic stones like the one Ariane had picked up before.

“That ship of undead had been gathering these……”

“What in the world could they be using these for?”

Chiome looked at the scattered magic stones before she asked her questions.

“There are various uses for this for elves, but humans still lack the technology to properly process them. The best they could do would be the『Explosive Magic Crystal』that was used in Hoban……”

A wrinkle formed on Ariane’s forehead as she stroked her chin and answered Chiome.

“The ship has sunk to the bottom of the lake, but the masterminds haven’t revealed themselves. We’ll only be wasting our time pondering this mystery here. Shouldn’t we focus on what to do from here on out?”

The two of them broke out of their thoughts about this whole situation and nodded at my proposal to move on.

“You’re right. It’s better to let the elders conduct a detailed investigation.”

“How about we take a break? Currently, there aren’t any signs of a threat in the nearby area, Ponta is barely managing to stay on Ariane’s neck.”

Chiome’s ears rose into the air before she suggested that we take a rest. Ponta was indeed raggedly hanging off Ariane’s neck.

“Ky〜un……”

Having to cling to Ariane as she fought and the mental fatigue from sensing the Spider Chimera and the undead must have tired the little fox out.

Ariane quickly took Ponta from around her neck and began nursing the fox against her chest.

Our little group moved to the lakeside and began discussing our future plans.

“Do you want to return to the cavern’s entrance with【Transfer Gate】and start over? Since I ingrained the entrance into my mind, escaping wouldn’t be a problem.”

Ariane stopped feeding dried beans to Ponta when I made my proposal and shook her head no in response.

“No, since a reconnaissance team needs to be sent to this place we should find a proper way out of here. Once we find our way out, we’ll return here and set up camp for the night. Apart from the undead, I believe this cave is relatively safe from monsters……”

Ariane voiced her suggestion while alternating her gaze between Chiome and me as if asking for our cooperation with her eyes.

“Well… A large amount of time has passed since we entered, and it may be dark outside by the time we leave. I think this place would be the most suitable campsite in this cavern, given the surplus of light and water.”

I nodded in agreement when Chiome spoke her opinion.

“Understood. Then let’s look for a way back up after our break.”

I nodded as if I had no objections and took off my helmet while sighing.

*

Silver: In the Raw【Sacred Lightning Sword】skill was the same name as Arc’s sword. I changed it for clarity’s sake.

Chapter 7: 「Dragon King」 Part 1

The next day, the forest within my view was illuminated by the afternoon sun.

The Wind Dragon Mountain Range extended to the east, connecting to the Ice Dragon Mountain Range in the northeast and the Fire Dragon Mountain Range spreading out before us.

This valley was somehow formed between these mountain ranges.

Yesterday, we were successfully able to find our way back to the main cavern from the underground lake and today we managed to complete our trek into the valley.

Back in the underground lake area, using earth spirit magic and transfer magic to climb up next to the waterfall, we found a branching passage that eventually led into the main cavern at the waterfall's mouth.

There had been plenty of light-emitting stones in the lake area that made the use of transfer magic possible.

We were now standing outside the cavern's exit, halfway down the Wind Dragon Mountain Range, with Ariane and Chiome taking in the scenery below us.

"We managed to make it out before dark."

Ariane sighed in relief after saying that and pulled out the map she received in the village.

"I've finally passed through the Wind Dragon Mountain Range. This will be good news for the village……"

"Ky〜un."

Chiome seemed deeply emotional about something as she stared out at the scenery, which allowed Ponta to happily play with her cat ears.

Chiome blushed a little at Ponta's playful antics before she returned to her usual expressionless face.

"Ariane-dono, where is the spring located?"

When I called out to Ariane she started to alternate her gaze between the map and scouting the area.

"It seems to be near the top of that mountain over there."

She pointed to a separate mountain that was located just beyond the forest below us as she spoke.

The mountain was next to the Wind Dragon Mountain Range and wasn't all that impressive in comparison. Sitting atop it was a huge tree whose roots covered the entire thing, and was giving off a strange vibe I could even feel here.

"I take it that that's the Dragon King's tree. Though I can't see any sign of a huge dragon from here."

I strained my eyes as I looked around the mountain.

"I still can't make out anything from here. When we do encounter the Dragon King, don't do anything reckless and leave the talking to me, alright?"

Ariane lightly thrust her finger against my armor as she spoke.

It wasn't like I wanted to pick a fight with the strongest of the dragon species, so I returned a silent nod.

Since there was no direct path from here to the Wind Dragon Mountain Range, we descended a gentle slope into the forest.

After our descent we continued walking along the eastern mountain and soon came across a hilly area from which the huge tree could be seen at a better vantage point.

Getting a closer look at the tree, I could see that the mountain the tree sat on was more spectacular I thought it'd be.

There was a small patch of grass between the blueish ground in front of the mountain and the rest of forest, with four large boulders set off to the side.

I could hardly believe my eyes when I caught sight of the structure that had been built at the base of the mountain.

Though I couldn't tell their exact height from here, based on the height of the surrounding trees they were maybe ten meters tall.

There were two pillars standing parallel to each other with a connecting bar near the top of them..... Seeing such an unusual structure in this uninhabited region caused me to unintentionally shout.

"That's impossible.....!?"

"Arc, what's the mat——!?"

A near silent mutter escaped my lips, as I unconsciously used【Dimensional Step】and materialized right in front of the gray stone structure.

I'm sure I heard Ariane try to say something before I transferred, but the activation of the spell cut her off. However, that was a trivial matter right now.

Right before my eyes stood a torii.

The bases of the pillars were covered in moss, there was no decoration and it was constructed of simple stone, but it was unquestionably a torii*.

After coming to this world, I haven't seen anything like this anywhere I've been.

I then remembered the reason Chiome had been accompanying us. She said she was in search of a hideout that the first head of the Blade Heart Clan had set up.

If the first head had been a japanese person like I thought he'd been, then this torii could be a marker for his secret hideout.

Just beyond the torii, I could see man-made steps carved into the foothill that would make climbing it easier.

The hideout that Chiome had been sent to find was probably located somewhere on this foothill. Just as I was about to go back and tell the good news, the ground beneath my feet suddenly started shaking.

"!?"

《To stand on this one's back, thou art quite reckless, young one!!》

I heard a strange voice in my head and frantically looked around to find its source, only to have the ground move beneath my feet and toss me into the air.

I was thrown a considerable distance into the air before the weight of my armor and body dragged me back down.

However, as I fell I caught sight of the bluish boulders uncoiling into two sets of large wings.

A large horned head attached to a long neck rose up and opened its large, fang-filled mouth before releasing a mighty roar that shook the whole area.

The shock wave that accompanied the roar caused the birds resting in the nearby tree to fly away.

I somehow managed to curl up into a ball in midair and safely disperse the momentum by rolling across the ground.

I was greeted by a giant dragon the moment I stood up.

The dragon's body was covered in bluish scales and the four wings on its back were completely uncoiled. The two horns on its head were pitch black and there was a striped pattern on its neck. From its head to the tip of its tail, the dragon was twenty, no, thirty meters tall.

Despite its large size, the dragon's movements were rather nimble. The dragon was also considerably powerful, given that a casual jerk of its body was enough to cut down a few nearby trees.

……I take it that this was the Dragon King Ariane talked about!!

When the Dragon's reptilian eyes focused in on me it opened its mouth and roared again.

My body was pushed back a little by the shockwave and I needed to shake my head to stop the ringing in my ears.

《Oh? For a young one to receive an attack of mine… It appears a challenger has come forth for this one!!》

A man's voice entered my head again as the Dragon smiled at me, baring its fangs in the process.

Then it started laughing.

The Dragon appeared to be the one producing the voice. It was using some kind of telepathy to communicate with me.

Normally, interactions between intellectual beings started with a proper greeting, but after a single glance the Dragon King had labeled me a hero here to challenge him.

I'd been so preoccupied with examining the torii that I hadn't even given any thought to the Dragon King.

When I looked up to the Dragon King, I knew I'd be crushed by this pinnacle of power if I didn't explain myself.

"Wait! I'm not here to—!"

I quickly tried to explain everything to the Dragon King, but he rudely cut me off before I could say anything.

《Cease your pleading! Prepare to pay the price of thy foolishness!!》

The Dragon King's shout rang through my head as his bulky body began to move. With a twist of his body, the Dragon King whipped his tail at me.

—I thought about the trivial matter of this being the first time an opponent didn't want to speak with me instead of the imminent threat that approached.

As the Dragon King's powerful tail closed in on me, it flattened everything in its way.

In half a breath, I used my left hand to grab the『Heavenly Shield of Titus』off my back and blocked the Dragon King's tail strike with it.

A massive shock traveled up my left arm and my hand became numb, but right now I didn't have time to worry about that.

As soon as his tail was repelled, the Dragon King had already pulled his

neck back. While I couldn't accurately grasp his movements, I saw a pale green light forming around his mouth that sent a shudder down my spine.

Having fought dragons in the game, I knew what was coming next.

The next moment, the Dragon King opened his mouth and unleashed a torrent of light and heat in my direction.

"Whaaaaaaaaaaaaattttttttt!!?"

The ray of light the Dragon King had released in a straight line had instantaneously blown away huge swathes of the forest and ground.

I had managed to dodge to the side just before the beam of light hit me, and proceeded to roll to disperses most of the damage the pressure wave had generated.

The surroundings shifted in my view as my body bounced against the ground like a skipping stone.

When I finally hit something strong enough to stop my momentum, I rose to my knees and tried to scan the area.

However, everything in front of me was pitch black.

"Huh!? Did the Dragon breath have a blinding effect as well!?"

I tried touching my face with my empty hand in a state of panic.

"Oh, my helmet was just turned around……"

It most likely spun around when I'd been thrown around by the shockwave. I fixed my helmet and checked my condition at once.

After confirming that I was alright, I slowly rose to my feet while looking around.

All that remained of the land after the Dragon King's breath attack was a smoking crater that had once been a grassy plain.

Somehow the mountain behind the torii had remained undamaged.

The nearby forest area had evaporated completely, leaving behind nothing but a deep linear gorge in the ground.

Even my current body might've been unable to survive a direct hit from that. I'd even suffered a bit of damage just evading the attack.

The name Dragon King wasn't just for show.

"This isn't the type of enemy one should fight alone..... 【Large Heal】"

Though I wasn't sure if this boney body could be bruised, I cast recovery magic on myself to alleviate any damage.

As the warm lights that appeared when I cast the spell were absorbed into my body, the pain I felt lessened and my body became lighter.

《Ohh... Thou art still alive even after being grazed by this one's attack. It appears this will be a worthwhile battle after all.》

As the smoke cleared, the bulking body of the Dragon King came into view and despite the distance I'd been thrown away I could hear his voice loud and clear in my head.

Even from here I could tell that the Dragon King's fighting spirit had risen. The Dragon King raised his tail again as he flapped his wings and became airborne.

Even if I tried to shout my explanation now, the enemy was dead set on fighting and there didn't seem to be a way to stop him.

I could run away with【Transfer Gate】, but I'd be leaving Ariane and Chiome behind. There was a limit to how fast I could move with【Dimensional Step】in this place, not to mention that Dragon King would easily keep up with me in an open field.

While I might've been able to dodge using short transfers, it would be difficult to shake off a flying dragon.

We were now beyond the point of using words.

— I resigned myself to my fate and drew my sword.

"【Sacred Lightning Sword】!!"

My sword's blade shined a deep blue color as it more than doubled in length and an electric aura wrapped around it.

No hard feelings.

Chapter 8: 「Dragon King」 Part 2

The Dragon King floated in the sky in a grandiose manner with its four wings. The flapping of said wings was so strong, it blew up a dust storm.

In the game, its behavior would match that of a Wind Dragon.

They were a subset of dragons with large wings, slim bodies and long tails. However, this dragon was about thirty meters tall and its thick limbs seemed strong enough to easily cut anyone that carelessly approached in half.

The dragon seemed like it could use the large sword in my hand as a toothpick. Quite impressive considering my sword had temporarily doubled in length thanks to a skill I'd activated.

In the game, earth attribute attacks would have an advantage over wind attribute foes. Unfortunately, it was hard to hit a flying enemy with earth based attacks.

I could try using【Rock Bullet】, but I remembered that airborne wyverns were able to easily dodge the attack.

There was a meteor fall magic spell that a certain high-level occupation could learn, but Heavenly Knights lacked that ability.

A being capable of flight was truly a menacing opponent.

It was also doubtful that the attribute balancing had an effect in this world in the first place.

《Here I come, Youngling!!》

At his shout, the Dragon King's body began to emit a radiant light. With a flick of its massive wings, an invisible force cut down the trees between us as it approached me.

It was similar to the wind attribute attack, Kamaitachi..... I remained calm with my『Holy Thunder Sword』and invoked a spell to dodge the invisible force.

"【Dimensional Step】!"

Just before the invisible attack reached me, I vanished.

《Huh!?》

I materialized right beneath the Dragon King's feet. Since the Dragon King had lost sight of me, he was frantically scanning the area for me.

The wind generated by the Dragon King's wing flaps was quite furious and almost sent me flying as I honed in on the long tail that was hanging off the end of the Dragon King's body.

It would be ineffective to attack the main body with my sword.

Because it was difficult to pinpoint something moving in midair, I had transferred to this location and slowly made my way to the tail, so as to not be blown away.

Let's see if my attacks can connect.

I looked up at the Dragon King as I pulled back my sword.

《!!? Reveal thyself!!》

His long tail drooped as he spoke, which gave me the opening I needed to launch a firm attack. An intense shock ran through my blade when it made contact with the tail.

A metallic clang you'd never expect to hear from a living creature's skin rang out as fresh blood coated my armor and everything in the vicinity.

As expected of the pinnacle of Dragons, his scales were strong enough to match mythical grade weapons.

《Huuuuuhhhhh!!》

The Dragon King let out a cry between a wail and a shout as he flapped his wings harder and turned around.

As the increased wind shattered my stance, I saw the low hanging tail heading straight for me.

Before it reached me, I invoked my transfer magic again.

"【Dimensional Step】!"

My view instantaneously changed to the Dragon King's blind spot beneath his tail. However, the Dragon King raised his tail faster than he should have been able to and whipped it at me.

"Huh!?"

Recognizing the danger, I invoked【Dimensional Step】three times in order to put some distance between us.

《You, you're using the same technique as Hanzo! It appears this one can't be careless either!!》

The Dragon King soared into the sky above the forest after he said that and began circling it.

After picking up some speed and momentum, the Dragon King dove at me with the claws on his hind legs fully extended.

I wasn't daring enough to take on such a huge enemy moving at such speed with a sword.

At the same time I used transfer magic to dodge the attack, I invoked an earth attribute spell in the place I had been standing.

"【Stone Fangs】!!"

The stone spikes that rose from the ground hit the nose-diving Dragon King head on, but they shattered upon collision, causing a cloud of dust and debris to fly into the air as a sound reminiscent of a meteor strike rocked the area.

From inside the dust cloud, the Dragon King opened his wings and rose into the sky like a missile.

The shock wave from the forceful takeoff hit me like a brick and was enough to clear the area of debris.

I'd be obliterated if I took something like that head on.

《How long dost thou plan to scurry about!? This time you won't escape!!》

When he finished speaking, the Dragon King soared higher above the

forest before falling in a magnificent arc.

In order to neutralize the Dragon King, it might be necessary to use the strongest offensive skills available to Heavenly Knights.

However, it'd take a considerable amount of time to complete the necessary preparations.

Turning my attention to the Dragon King, I ran out into the open and held out my hand to invoke a new spell.

"Come forth, he who rules the skies! Storm King【Seteka】!!"

An enormous magic circle appeared in front of me. I could feel my mana pouring into it as the circle's complex symbols started shifting and wind began to gather at its center.

A large tornado burst from the magic circle and wrecked havoc on the forest as it rose into the heavens.

The summoned beasts that I could use were too powerful to be used against human opponents, but there wasn't a problem if I used them against a Dragon King.

The Dragon King smiled a little when he saw the tornado, but his speed didn't decrease and his body began to emit light again.

It seems that he intended to level this entire area with the Dragon Breath attack he used before.

Something like a carpet bombing strategy.

The green light covered the Dragon King's mouth and the next moment a beam of light was sent flying towards my direction.

When the Dragon Breath attack collided with the tornado in front of me, the beam of light dispersed as if it had hit an invisible wall.

I somehow made it in time.

The humanoid summoned beast was over five meters tall.

However, unlike a normal human, this summoned beast had a pair of rectangular ears that were standing on the top of its head and the skin of its long, narrow face was ash-grey. Its rather anteater-like appearance was made even more monstrous by its four massive arms.

On its body it wore some sort of cloth that was decorated with a strange painted-on armor pattern, and flashy ornaments were attached all over its muscular body. Each set of its arms was holding a kindjal and a shield, and its two feet were clad in a tornado, allowing it to quietly stand in mid-air.

This was a summoned beast of the intermediate level that could create wind blades and area of effect storms.

It was a summoned beast that used the same wind attribute as the Dragon King and could fly.

『Seteka』 opened and closed its eyelids before using it's golden eyes to glare at the approaching dragon, starting to emit light and wind from its body.

《What is that mass of spiritual power!? Could it be one of the Spirit Kings!?》

I heard the Dragon King's surprised shout in my head just as he collided

with the『Seteka』, which had surrounded itself in a raging storm.

The force created by the collision sent a destructive storm through the area.

The over thirty meter tall dragon and the five meter tall summoned beast rose above the forest while intensely fighting.

Sparks flew as the『Seteka』held its kindjal against the claws on the Dragon King's forepaws.

A similar standoff occurred when the Dragon King went in for a bite. Every time the two engaged each other, a shock wave jolted me to my very core.

When the two disengaged from each other, the constant bombardment of long ranged magic attacks from both sides prevented either from closing the gap.

Countless wounds had appeared on the two of them as the long and short-range battles continued.『Seteka』was by no means inferior to the Dragon King in terms of power.

Despite that, there was a limit to how long a summoned beast could last.

So it wasn't the deciding factor in this battle.

However, it was a temporary distraction that had bought me enough time.

The four most powerful skills of the Heavenly Knight:【The Executor】, 【The Judge】,【The Guardian】, and【The Prophet】.

Each skill is equivalent to a weapon of mass destruction. There was no wiggle room when using them and each carried a twelve-hour cooldown time. Even with my large mana pool I could only use three of them at a time.

Since the enemy was a Dragon King,【The Judge】may be the best one to use.

It would allow me to soar in the sky like the Dragon King after all.

I returned my gaze to the battle raging in the sky.

The skill was rather annoying to use in the game, so I wondered what would actually happen when I used it..... That was the question running through my mind as the Dragon King's and summoned beast's fierce battle unfolded before my eyes.

I was certain that taking this guy down would create an immeasurable amount of collateral damage.

But..... there was no helping it.

As I raised my sword to the sky, a surge of power filled my body as I prepared to activate the skill... However, a group of water wolf summons suddenly hit the Dragon King and the summoned beast.

I recognized those wolves as something created with Chiome's ninjutsu.

"Please halt this duel, Dragon King-sama!!"

Chiome leaped out of the remains of the forest, did an impressive aerial twist and soundlessly landed in front of me, pleading with the Dragon King in the sky.

She managed to run all the way over here without any transfer magic. The tremendous speed of a ninja is quite terrifying.

When the Dragon King saw Chiome, he stopped moving and narrowed his reptilian eyes at her.

《Ho..... That appearance, art thou a member of Hanzo's clan?》

The Dragon King had brought up that name a while ago, when I used【Dimensional Step】, so maybe he had some connection to Chiome's Clan.

Although she was a little startled by the Dragon King's question, Chiome managed to answer him.

"My name is Chiome. I possess one of the six titles that have been passed down since Hanzo the first led the clan."

The Dragon King smiled a little at her reply.

《One so young, already bearing a spirit crystal..... Is that a testament to

your skill or of your clan's decline?》

Chiome looked up at the sky when she heard the Dragon King's calm voice.

Then I heard the familiar voice of the last person late to this party.

"Dragon King, that person is our companion. My name is Ariane Glenys Maple, of the Great Canada Forest. Would you please excuse his rude behavior and listen to our story?"

"Kyun!"

Ariane's long, white hair was jostled by the wind that the Dragon King's flapping wings created.

The fluffy-tailed Ponta barked at the enormous dragon as she sat on Ariane's shoulder.

There was no sign of Ponta's timid nature as she stared down the Dragon King. She was even wagging her tail in an attempt to get its attention.

Ariane, also acting out of character, had knelt before the Dragon King and spoke to him in a polite tone.

When Ariane appeared, the『Seteka』that had been fighting the Dragon King disappeared into thin air.

It seems the time limit had run out.

The Dragon King's fighting spirit faded as well and he landed on the ground in front of us before folding his large wings.

I returned my sword to my sheath and broke my combat stance.

《Forest dweller from beyond the mountains..... This one is known as Williahsfim. I will accept your apology and hear you out.》

The Dragon King identified himself with a snort strong enough to blow up a dust cloud.

Chapter 9: 「Dragon King (Joy)」

《I see..... The man in the armor seeks the power of the spring and you're accompanying him as a guide?》

"Yes."

Hearing Ariane's reply to his question, the Dragon King turned to me and narrowed his eyes.

Ponta was in her usual spot atop my helmet and was cheerfully wagging her tail for some reason.

While I thought she'd been acting braver in this strange place, my worries disappeared when I heard her purr as I stroked her neck and muzzle.

Williahsfim smiled a little when he saw our little scene play out right in front of him.

《Hmm. I would like to apologize, I had decided to take a nap in the plains away from my tree and jumped to conclusions.》

Williahsfim cleared his throat before closing his eyes and offering me an apology.

So the Dragon King had been in the middle of his nap when I arrived. Anyone would be angry if someone stepped on them while they were asleep..... so I lowered my head to him as well.

"I had been too preoccupied with analyzing that structure over there to pay any attention to my surroundings. I'm sorry as well."

I reflected on my careless actions that led to this whole mess as I bowed my head.

"Well, Williahsfim-sama. Will you grant us access to the spring near the Dragon King's Tree?"

Ariane looked up at Williahsfim as she asked permission to access the goal of our quest.

《As long as you do not meddle with the tree I nest in, you don't need to

ask my permission to do anything.》

Ariane had a rather joyful expression when she heard Williahsfim's answer.

"Thank you very much, then——"

《N-No, wait a minute!》

Just as Ariane was in the middle or standing up and offering her gratitude, Williahsfim shouted for her to stop.

《No, you see..... even though this one is partially to blame for this situation, some of the guilt still rests on your heads..... so a bit of reparation is owed.》

A moment ago, he had been full of dignity befitting of a Dragon King, but now he was mumbling and couldn't look at Ariane directly.

His tail that had been drooping down until now, was wagging back and forth like a happy, small animal's tail.

Confusion floated across Ariane's face at Williahsfim's strange behavior, but she still kneeled once more and asked him what was on his mind.

"Williahsfim-sama, what is it that you would like to have us do as penance?"

《Well, um... That is... Thy people art living in the forest that is the home of Ferufivisurotte... So, would you arrange an audience for this one, please? If it is possible?》

When the Dragon King began making a waiting gesture with his large black claws, I whispered a question into Ariane's ear.

"Ariane-dono, who is this Ferufivisurotte that he's talking about?"

Ariane turned her confused gaze onto Williahsfim for a moment before she told me the identity of the person in a low voice.

"Ferufivisurotte-sama is the Dragon King that inhabits the Colombia Mountain that sits in the center of Canada forest. Ferufivisurotte-sama,

who was on friendly terms with first chieftain Evangeline, was also the first Dragon King to offer the forest their protection."

After hearing her explanation, I looked up at the tense Dragon King in front of me.

Since he had to call on others to arrange a meeting with this person, Ferufivisurotte must carry a considerable amount of power amongst the Dragon Kings.

More importantly, the image of a coffee bean came to mind when I heard the name Colombia Mountain. "Canada" "Maple" and now "Colombia"... all names originating from one location.

At this point, it wouldn't surprise me if there was a Rocky Mountain somewhere.

In any case, I'd heard Ariane speak about the Dragon Kings' protection before.

If there were multiple beings as strong as Williahsfim offering protection to the forest, then a human invasion was nigh impossible.

Even if elves were known as a minority that hid away in their forest, I could see how they would be able to fight off the human forces despite the numerical disadvantage.

I took another look at the disaster area and the uprooted trees that the previous fight had created.

Even with the use of magic, it would be suicide to challenge creatures that wielded such power. Something akin to shooting down a bomber plane with a handgun.

There was no chance of victory whatsoever.

"Can you actually grant Williahsfim-dono's request?"

"Kyun?"

Although Ariane was the daughter of a village elder, I doubted a mere warrior like her could make a request of such an important figure in Great Canada Forest.

Ponta also seemed confused for some reason as she looked between me and Ariane.

Ariane tapped her finger against her chin as she thought it over before she turned to the waiting Williahsfim.

“I can’t make any promises here, but my elder sister Ivana is a personal acquaintance of Ferufivisurotte-sama and I can pass the request on to her. Will that be sufficient?”

Despite his reptilian appearance, Williahsfim wagged his tail and had a happy expression on his face when he heard her answer.

《Hoo, you mean it! I appreciate it!! Settling down in this forest has brought me a stroke of good luck, I now have a chance to indirectly set up a meeting with Ferufivisurotte-dono. It wouldn’t look good if I came off as too strong, would it?》

In spite of how large he was, the Dragon King was acting like a happy puppy rather than a being capable of reducing large swaths of land to ash.

“Then can we proceed to the spring now?”

Ariane was shocked at Williahsfim ‘s strange behavior as she stood up and looked towards the mountain.

《Sure, I’m usually in the area, so you’re welcome to come by anytime.》

Williahsfim unfolded his wings as he prepared to fly away, but Chiome, who had been quietly watching the proceedings until now, stepped forward and stopped him.

“Please wait, Dragon King-sama! I have a request as well!”

Williahsfim closed his wings and turned his large head towards Chiome when she called out to him.

《What is it thou desires, member of Hanzo’s Clan? This one doesn’t mind hearing you out.》

“I was told that Dragon King-sama and Lord Hanzo were acquaintances, so would you happen to know the location of his former residence?”

《Oh, that... It's close to the spring, near the top of this hill. When this one first visited this area to build his nest, that person had already been living here.》

Chiome looked up at the foothill beyond the torri after Williahsfim answered her question.

It seemed like our destination was the same after all. Well, it saved us the trouble of searching for it.

"Thank you very much."

After nodding at Chiome's bowed head and thanks, Williahsfim extended his wings and flew off toward the huge Dragon King's tree that could be seen in the distance.

"We appear to be heading to the same place Chiome-dono."

"That seems to be the case. I didn't expect things to proceed so smoothly."

Chiome looked in the direction Williahsfim had flown off to before looking at me with a small smile on her face.

"We have the Dragon King's permission, so let's head to the summit."

"Kyun!"

Ponta wagged her tail and made an energetic cry when I took a step towards the torri at the base of the foothill.

However, Ariane silently approached me and spoke to me in a bright tone that contradicted the cold smile she had.

"Arc..... do you plan to act on your own again?"

Overwhelmed by her smile and the veins that pulsed on her forehead, I rapidly shook my head and moved three steps backwards.

The aura she was emitting created the hallucination of a hulking beast that pressured me as she approached.

"S-Sorry, Ariane-dono. I acted rashly when I saw that artifact over there."

There was no room for excuses this time.

I had been so distracted by the torri that I recklessly charged into an unknown area without paying attention to my surroundings..... if I were in a movie, I have been the person that died first.

My bit of person retrospection surprised Ariane for a moment but she managed to shrug it off.

“Arc your actions were rather childish, but you seem to have calmed down.....”

She sighed a little after she said that.

It seemed like this incident would be overlooked. Now I was certain that she was Glenys’ daughter..... both of them were scary when they got serious.....

“Still, I’m impressed Arc-dono. I can’t believe you fought on equal terms with a Dragon King.”

Chiome’s cheeks were flushed with an unusual amount of excitement when she voiced her opinion next to Ariane.

She was looking up at me with pure admiration.

“Umm. Well, I couldn’t afford to make a mistake.....”

I was a little embarrassed by Chiome’s gaze so I gave a vague reply.

Be as it may, I really couldn’t afford to screw up against the Dragon King.

I once thought that this body and the skills it possessed were potentially on the same level as military ammunition.

However, having to fight a being with strength equaling own my made me realize the insanity of living in this world.

If I became too blinded by my own power, my life might be snuffed out one day.

Besides.....

“Ariane-dono, is the Dragon King you promised to set up a meeting with

even more powerful than Williahsfim-dono?"

The fact that there existed a being that even Williahsfim paid tribute to was something that heavily weighed on my mind.

However, Ariane simply raised her eyebrow and groaned.

"From what I've heard, Dragon King Ferufivisurotte-sama carries a considerable amount of influence over the other Dragon Kings, but I can't help but feel that there was a hidden agenda behind Williahsfim-sama's request……"

"A hidden agenda! What do you think he could be plotting?"

Judging from Williahsfim's joyful celebration I immediately questioned Ariane's opinion. It didn't seem like he intended to harm anybody.

Ariane must have been aware of this and she cleared away what she had been thinking with a shake of her head.

However, her next statement gave me the information I needed to figure out Williahsfim's intentions.

"Ferufivisurotte-sama is female so maybe……"

I snapped my gaze to Ariane when she continued speaking.

It's easy to understand a strong being holding someone even stronger in high regard and having a desire to personally meet that person.

But, things were a little different when it involved a man and a woman.

"Ariane-dono, you said that your older sister could set up a meeting with Ferufivisurotte-dono, but are you sure she can do that?"

It is a common practice for some men to approach a third party to set up a date, but oftentimes the woman would just find the whole affair tedious.

Ariane looked worried for a second but she still nodded her head in response.

"It should be alright since I didn't make a direct promise. I just have to get my sister to use her influence to bring the matter up next time she

speaks with Ferufivisurotte-sama."

She shrugged and sighed after saying that.

I had seen dignity befitting a Dragon King in Williahsfim before, but after that happy outburst I could only see him as a man stuck in an unrequited love.

"Alright, shall we set out for the spring now?"

Chiome and I nodded at Ariane's proposal and I set my gaze upon the mountain that towered over us.

..... Soon afterwards, we reached our destination.

Chapter 10: 「The Power of the Spring, the Power of the Curse」

We ascended the moss covered steps with sunlight shining through the trees.

Although they were carved into a gentle slope, the steps were already breaking away due to prolonged neglect.

Since there weren't any signs of people living in the area, the forest animals used this path. I could see animal tracks embedded into the soil that had accumulated on top of the steps.

The chirping of birds, carried along the wind, helped complete the calm atmosphere.

Without the large monsters that inhabited Great Canada Forest and the nearby mountains, I felt as if I were on a weekend hike.

The only thing out of place was the large tree that the Dragon King used as his resting place.

There were few monsters that would try to settle down near such an overwhelming predator, while the weaker creatures sought shelter here.

A pair of squirrels sitting on a tree branch looked at us as strange intruders as we passed them by.

When it reached the point where Ponta had to sit on my helmet and we had to start cutting our way through the undergrowth to clear the path, birds and other animals would occasionally jump out at us.

The scenery only opened up once we managed to pass through the torii near the top of the hill.

There were still a few trees located here, but there wasn't much undergrowth or a lot of boulders in the area.

Instead, we got a clear view of the wall-like trunk of the Dragon King's tree and the innumerable amount of branches that covered the area in the tree's shadow.

My gaze unintentionally traveled up the tree as far as I could and then went down the mountain range behind it.

“This is an unbelievably large tree.”

The trees in Great Canada Forest were certainly large, but this was on an entirely different level.This tree reminded me of a certain tree that held up a heavenly castle.

My comment caused both Ariane and Chiome to simultaneously look up at the huge tree.

“The Dragon King’s Tree seems like a mountain on top of another mountain.”

Chiome was in slight awe of the view before us.

“I’ve seen it in picture books when I was little, but this is the first time I’ve seen it in person.”

Ariane gulped down some water from the canteen she had brought, wiping the sweat off of her brow after she stopped talking.

“Come on, we’re almost there.”

She resumed her trek after urging us to continue.

Eventually, the stone steps came to an end and a smaller version of the torii that stood at the base of the hill came into view.

The landscape between us and the torii was completely desolate with sunlight shining down on it, but beyond the torii, the density of the trees increased.

“We appear to have reached our destination.”

When we finally passed through the torii, I took a look around.

This place seemed to have originally been a small basin. Because the place had been neglected for such a long time, the path was uneven and covered in grass, but I could make out steps descending into the basin.

At the end of the stairway stood a single decaying building.

The wooden roof had already collapsed in on itself, but the stone walls

covered in moss had remained mostly intact.

The shape of the building was also familiar to me.

“It looks like a shrine……”

Ariane spoke her opinion of the building right beside me.

And she wasn’t wrong either.

The building’s structure and torii gates were reminiscent of a Shinto shrine.

The main shrine stood in front of the building and window frames were evenly spaced on both wings of the building.

However, unlike a regular shine, there was no offering box or bell anywhere in sight and there was only one entrance to the left.

“This is the residence that Lord Hanzo once occupied. It is similar to the chief’s house in the village.”

When Chiome saw the decaying shrine-like building she was convinced that it was the first clan head’s hideout.

It was as if simply seeing this building left no room for doubt in her mind.

The thin layer of mist and the sacred Dragon King’s Tree in the background certainly gave the tranquil scenery a tinge of mystery.

Chiome had begun scouting the area but all of a sudden her cat ears stood up and her nose twitched as she calmly opened her mouth.

“The scent of the water has changed……”

“Kyun!”

Ponta cried out in agreement with her statement from atop my helmet.

While I lacked the enhanced sense of smell the two of them had, when I strained my ears I could pick up the sound of running water nearby.

“It must be the rumored spring……”

“The sound…… is originating from behind the shrine.”

The others nodded at my comment before Chiome took the lead and began to walk towards the shrine.

She stepped off the stone path and took a detour around the back of the shine, with Ariane and I silently following.

There was something completely unexpected behind the shrine.

A steam of hot water was endlessly flowing into the area from a slightly elevated rock formation. The water was flowing into a hollowed out groove, and to prevent the water from overflowing there was a cliff at the groove that allowed excess water to be drained off.

By all accounts, this was an artificially created hot spring……

“Is that hot water flowing out!?”

Ariane uttered a shout as her pointed ears began to move up and down.

Seems like this was the first time she saw a hot spring.

Chiome was also surprised, but apparently she already knew about hot springs and was smiling as if she has found something really good.

“It’s a hot spring…… a quite large one at that.”

Chiome was right, seeing how this hot spring’s two main pools were about twenty-five meters wide.

This outdoor hot spring was like one of those you’d find at a large hotel, yet the moss covered rocks made it seem like an undiscovered natural spring.

“Certainly, this is an impressive hot spring, but is it the one we seek?”

“Looks like it.”

Seeing my doubts, Ariane bent down in front of the hot spring and soaked her hand into it before standing back up.

“Kyun! Kyun!”

Ponta showed some interest in the spring as well, since she jumped from my helmet and proceeded to dip her forepaw, nose and tongue into it.

I never thought that the spring we sought would be a hot spring, but it was a nice surprise, to say the least.

I took off one of my gauntlets and dipped my hand into the water.

The water's heat was gradually transmitted to my hand. After a few seconds of this, I pulled my hand out of the water to find a hand with a similar shade of brown as my forearm was when I used【Anti-Curse】on it.

However, I didn't feel any discomfort like when I used【Anti-Curse】.

"Ahh!? The effects appear to be genuine."

Both Ariane and Chiome were utterly shocked when I showed them the flesh and blood hand that had been skeletal just a moment ago.

"There really was a body after all....."

Ariane muttered something in a disbelieving tone.

That reminds me, I never showed anyone that I could momentarily remove the curse with the【Anti-Curse】spell.

After all, the end result had been quite hard to look at.

After a few minutes, my hand returned to its skeletal form. The temporary effect of the cure was still the same.

Not even this hot spring could permanently cure me..... maybe the effect will last if I completely submerge myself.

There's no point worrying about it anymore.

"I'm going to see what soaking in the hot spring does."

I set down my baggage on a nearby rock before taking my helmet off and placing it next to it.

However, that was only a secondary concern. Mostly, I just wanted to take a breather in the hot spring while enjoying the fantasy-like scenery.

I'm only bones, though.....

It was a little chilly when I removed the upper section of my armor and

shivered on reflex.

The joke would be me saying “I didn’t feel cold, though.”

“Wait! Don’t just start undressing in front of us.”

Ariane suddenly uttered a protest from behind me. When I looked back I saw that Ariane’s ears had turned red.

“Huh? Ariane-dono, did you get excited seeing my bo—”

Before I could finish speaking Ariane had silently punched my rib cage.

..... That stung a bit.

“We’ll check out the shrine while Arc soaks in the in the spring. Let’s go, Chiome-chan.”

Ariane told Chiome to follow her as she took large strides back towards the shrine.

“We will investigate the residence then, Arc-dono. See you in a bit.”

Chiome bowed before chasing after Ariane.

As I rubbed my rib and faced the hot spring again, I saw Ponta happily wagging her tail.

“Oh, you want to get in together, Ponta?”

“Kyun!”

Ponta wagged her tail faster as I bent down to pat her head.

I removed the last piece of my armor and stood in front of the hot spring.

It was custom to clean one’s body before entering a spring, but there was no means of doing that here..... but I suppose no one else would be using this spring anytime soon.

All alone in an open-air bath, there was only one thing to do.....

“Yahoo!”

“Kyu-n!”

With a spirited shout, I took a large leap into the hot spring. After poking my head above the water I shook my head to clear away the water on my face.

Ponta, who had jumped in with me, was doing the doggy paddle.

“Pwah! I never imaged I’d bathe in a mountain hot spring.”

I looked down at my arm as I spoke.

I saw a muscular, brown skinned arm instead of a skeletal one. Seeing the highly developed abs on my stomach when I looked down confused me, since my original body shouldn’t have been that muscular.

It hadn’t been that long since I came to this world..... Besides, there wasn’t any reason for me to develop muscles while I was a skeleton.

“Hmm?”

I decided to take a look at my face reflected in the water.

As the rippling water calmed down I could finally see my face reflected on the surface.

However, the face I saw wasn’t the one I had in my old world.

The person I saw appeared to be in his mid-thirties, had raven-black curly hair, Arabian brown skin, stubble and a masculine face. The man’s dark red eyes and long ears were features that differed greatly from those of humans.

“This.....?”

I was stunned at the unfamiliar face, but then I remembered where I’ve seen it before.....

At the same time I realized the origin of this face and my mind and heart were overcome with dark emotions.

“GHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

A severe pain raged through my head like a storm, and its source seemed to be the depths of my very being.

The rage I felt at the men that attempted to rape the first women I’d

met, the disgust I felt towards how the slaves were treated, the fear I felt while fighting monsters, the regret of taking someone's life..... the longing I felt to return home.

All I've experienced in this world flashed through my mind like a revolving lantern, with everything I've done being dyed black in negative connotations.

I continued to roar and shout as if I were trying to deny it all, but it wasn't working.

Despite standing in a hot spring my body was chilled to the core as the fury and pain rampaged through my heart. In a desperate attempt to alleviate the pain, I smashed my head against a rock at the edge of the hot spring, but the rock crumbled upon impact.

Still extremely unbalanced by the pain and anger I fell down and swallowed some of the water as I crawled out of the spring.

"Ky-un! Ky-un!"

Ponta was surprised at my sudden, violent outburst and leaped out of the water, running after me.

I saw Ponta's small frame coming towards me before my gaze traveled down my own body.

As my vision began to fade, the trite thought of the thing between my legs being 1.5 times larger that my original one flashed through my head.

I heard footsteps of someone approaching and a familiar voice.

"What happened!? Who are you!!?"

"Kyun! Kyun!"

Ariane call out to me in the distance.

The feeling of something desperately licking my cheek was the only thing my numbed body could feel.

And then the darkness consumed what remained of my consciousness.....

Chapter 11: 「The Return of the Princess」 Part 1

The Hoban territory of Rhoden Kingdom.

Hoban sat between the Annette mountains in the west and the Parnassus mountains in the south. The territory was relatively wealthy thanks to its location between Rhoden's capital and the Riburuto Archdukedom.

However, the territory's people had recently launched a revolt against the heavy taxation and tyrannical rule of earl Ferris De Hoban and slew him.

The territory became rather chaotic after that, but a suppression corps led by the first prince was dispatched from the capital and managed to quell the riots and anarchy.

Afterward, the first prince took up an administrative role in Hoban's reconstruction and was currently processing paperwork in the former feudal lord's castle.

Since the main building of the castle had been vandalized and robbed at some point during the revolt, the first prince had made his base in a small, nearby annex.

The room he worked from was smaller than a palace living room and shabbily decorated.

A tall young man brushed a brown lock of hair from his eye as he was looking over the reports in front of him with a slight wrinkle on his forehead.

This young man in a luxurious military uniform was Rhoden Kingdom's first prince, Sect Rondaro Carunon Rhoden.

Prince Sect had been rather busy after subjugating the rebellion in Hoban and the constant worries on his mind had drained away some of his usual energy.

A sudden knock on the door informed him of a visitor.

“Enter.”

Prince Sect momentarily looked away from the documents in his hands and gave the person at the door permission to enter.

“Excuse me.”

After a little while, the door opened and a single, middle-aged man entered.

The man had brown hair and a mustache, his large body was dressed in a proper military uniform and that, along with his silent disposition, gave the man a strict aura.

His name was Setorion De Olsterio.

He was the general who led the troops dispatched to Hoban and the main supporter of prince Sect’s bid for the throne.

“We just received word from lord Tiosera. Shortly after your highness declared princess Juliana dead, her party was seen crossing through his territory.”

General Setorion gave his report in a monotone voice, but it made the prince throw the document he had been reading down and leap from his seat.

“……So you survived after all, Julianna.”

More wrinkles appeared on prince Sect’s forehead as he spoke.

The content of that report had been the main issue on the prince’s mind these days.

Second princess Juliana was the daughter of the Rhoden’s first queen and held rights to the throne. Sect had set her up to be assassinated and pushed the blame on the deceased second prince.

However, an unanticipated monster attack had forced the assassins to retreat and the team that had been sent to recover Juliana’s body found that the carriage, a majority of the guards, and the princess had all

disappeared.

A member of one of the seven duke families carried out the assassination. Cox Carlo De Brutus had provided the princess' heirloom along with his report of the attack, but Setorion had just proven that Cox's report had been wrong.

"Even though it was the least likely outcome, the worst has happened……"

Prince Sect laughed in self-mockery before sighing.

The prince had even received the necklace his younger sister had never taken off because it was a keepsake from her deceased mother.

Juliana must've been rendered unconscious in order for the necklace to have been stolen from her.

In addition, a pack of ferocious Haunting Wolves had attacked the area a short time after the assassination, making it near impossible for a critically injured person to survive.

Even if the monsters ignored them, the party would have needed time to recover before they could make any public appearances.

However, from the report he just received, Juliana was in good health and had been seen crossing the Tiosera territory at the edge of Rhoden kingdom.

"How would you like to act, your highness?"

General Setorion called out to the pondering Sect.

Prince Sect returned from his head space and sat back down in his chair with a loud sigh.

When Cox was asked about his actions as the assassination corps commander, he had stated that he led the attack from a distance and hadn't been the one to struck Juliana down.

The possibility of him being connected to the attack was minuscule at best.

Assuming the worst, it might be too dangerous to attempt a second assassination. Sect began running through possible solutions to his problem while staring at Setorion.

"Although the discovery of our involvement is unlikely, we can't afford to be careless on the off-chance that Juliana found out we were the ones behind the assassination attempt..... Is there any way Tiosera can handle this on his own?"

Prince Sect lowered his voice when he asked that question, but Setorion just shook his head.

"Unfortunately, thirty guards remained from princess Juliana's original party, along with two hundred guards bearing the flag of the Rinburuto Archdukedom."

Prince Sect chewed his lip and lifted an eyebrow at that answer.

"Damn, Juliana is receiving help from our sister....."

Juliana's older sister had married into the Tishiento family and was now the grand duchess of Rinburuto, and the two had had a good relationship when she was still in the kingdom.

If Juliana managed to reach her older sister in Rinburuto after the assassination attempt, then it was reasonable that her older sister would send soldiers to protect her.

"Also, it seems that princess Juliana's party also included a group of thirty elven warriors, so it's nigh impossible to break through their defenses."

"What!? Did you say elven warriors!?"

Prince Sect had an astonished expression on his face as he shouted for Setorion to elaborate.

The elves were a race that occupied Canada Forest to the east of Rhoden, and their warriors were masters of magic that had cultivated their swordsmanship over their long lifespans.

If thirty of those warriors served as Juliana's guards, then it would

require a large number of regular soldiers just to overwhelm them, but that would attract too much attention.

Orchestrating an assassination would be unreasonable at this point.

However..... prince Sect just crossed his arms after his outburst.

“Why are elves among Juliana’s escorts?”

Questioning this situation was the natural thing to do.

Rhoden Kingdom had once started a war with the elves, so saying their relationship wasn’t that great was an understatement.

The elves had retreated into Great Canada Forest to escape persecution from humans, and their sole trading partner was the Rinburuto Archdukedom. It was rare to see them in any other country.

Why would the elves set foot in a human country to protect princess Juliana..... the unknown reason behind their actions made Sect anxious.

However, the corners of general Setorion’s mouth rose as Sect looked directly at him before the general started speaking.

“There should be no need to worry, even if they reach us.”

“What?”

“Your younger sister survived a heinous attack from prince Douglass, shouldn’t you greet her with open arms?”

Chapter 12: 「The Return of the Princess」 Part 2

Two days later, Princess Juliana's party entered the Hoban territory and the princess was sent to meet with prince Sect in the feudal lord's castle.

A young woman with long, dark blonde hair that fell down in loose waves, lovely brown eyes and white, regular features now stood in front of prince Sect.

The young woman lifted the hem of her dress and offered the prince a greeting in a manner befitting of royalty.

From her elegant demeanor, it was obvious the princess wasn't suffering from any wounds, which caused prince Sect's eyebrow to twitch.

"It's been a while, onii-sama."

This young woman was no other than the second princess Juliana Meroru Melissa Rhoden Olav.

One of the two people who stood behind her was a young man with short, brown hair and a square jaw, Lendl Do Frivetran.

A member of the seven duke households, son of one of Rhoden's three generals and the leader of Juliana's escort.

He should have been fatally injured during the assassination attempt, yet his perfectly fine appearance made one question if the surprise attack had actually happened.

Next to him stood a nearly two-meter tall man in the prime of his life.

He had trimmed white hair and lilac skin, a large scar on his face and his body was robust and rugged. All of this only made him stand out even more than a dark elf in a human country normally would.

As a security measure, the man was unarmed, but the intimidating aura he gave off made it perfectly clear that he could overwhelm the nearby human guards with his bare hands.

Prince Sect tried to ignore the cold sweat running down his back as he smiled at his sister.

“Yes, it has been, Juliana. I’m happy to see you’re alive and well. I couldn’t bear watching after I informed father of your passing.”

Juliana returned Sect’s faint smile with a full smile of her own.

“When I was attacked on my way to Rinburuto, I was sure I would meet my end. However, thanks to the gods, I stand here before you.”

“Still, I never expected Douglass to take such violent measures against us.”

Sect signed loudly after she made that comment.

“Were you attacked by brother as well?”

“Yes, my arm..... Though I was normally no match for Douglass in combat, I managed to fight him off..... Perhaps the gods are watching over me as well?”

Sect jokingly replied to Juliana’s question.

Though her eyes narrowed slightly, the princess continued to smile at her older brother.

“From what I’ve heard, when Douglass’ attack against you was announced in the capital, my death was also announced. Why is that?”

Juliana remained silent as she earnestly examined Sect’s face in an attempt to find even the slightest change in his expression.

However, Sect simply narrowed his eyes and let out a disgusted sigh before loudly snorting.

“Douglass was in possession of the necklace you always held onto in memory of your mother..... I had assumed he had slain you to obtain it.”

“However, it wasn’t like my body had been found, was it?”

“Certainly. When I learned where you had been attacked, our search party could only find the corpses of bandits in the area. Apparently, monsters had been through the area before they had arrived.”

"I see, but the carriage was missing as well, wasn't it?"

Prince Sect held up his index finger and had a disappointed look on his face as he shook his head at Juliana's question.

"You make a good point. I thought there was a slight chance of you being alive. However, because your whereabouts were unknown, I didn't want to endanger you by making that possibility known. Additionally, with the revolt that happened here in Hoban, the nobles are just biting for a chance to ridicule the royal family..... To show that the royal family's authority is still strong, someone needed to take the lead and restore order."

Juliana's smile thinned and she raised an eyebrow as Sect continued to speak.

"If you were found to be alive, then those who are disapproving of you ascending to the throne could have stationed troops here to kill you. Not to mention that Hoban is an important way station that can't remain in discord for long. The neighboring nobles won't remain silent with the feudal lord's seat now empty. You understand, right?"

Juliana paused for a bit before she answered her brother.

"Yes..... I can see things from your perspective, onii-sama....."

Upon hearing her answer, Sect clapped his hands together and nodded.

"I'm glad you understand. Now I have a question of my own. I understand that you have escorts from Rinburuto, but how did you befriend that dark elf behind you?"

Juliana lightly cleared her throat before answering Sect's question.

"Serena arranged for the Rinburuto Archdukedom's soldiers to defend me until we reach the capital. And this dark elf gentleman here is a great elder of Great Canada Forest, Fangas Furan Maple."

Sect's eyes bulged a bit when he heard this before she turned to the ridiculously muscled, smiling dark elf he had assumed to be a mere soldier.

The great elders were the leaders and decision makers of Great Canada Forest, and the man before him was one of them.

While one had occasionally been seen in Rinburuto, this was the first time one has visited Rhoden.

Understanding dawned on prince Sect as he realized why someone like that would be accompanying Juliana to the capital.

"..... Could it be, trade negotiations?"

Juliana nodded in affirmation at Sect's utterance.

"Yes. The elves of Great Canada Forest intend to form a trade relationship with Rhoden Kingdom, and elder Fangas has taken the trouble to personally arrange the details of the deal."

Until now, the only country the elves had been willing to trade with was Rinburuto..... thanks to that, the small country was able to amass an impressive amount of wealth from selling elven magic tools to the other human countries.

If Rhoden Kingdom became trading partners with the elves, then Rinburuto would lose its monopoly on the tools. However, considering that Juliana's escorts were partially composed of Rinburuto, then the country must have already accepted it.

"What goods are to be traded?"

"The main item to be traded are『Abundant Harvest Stones』."

Sect had to swallow his saliva and speak in a cheerful tone to hide how anxious Juliana's comment had made him.

"That's wonderful! Our country will certainly benefit from this deal."

When『Abundant Harvest Stones』were crushed into a fine powder and spread over fields they increased the vitality of the land and the yield of crops.

In a world filled with monsters, there were few fertile areas for humans to occupy..... and that item was capable of directly raising the prosperity of the land.

If she managed to obtain these items without having to go through the Rinburuto Archdukedom, then the nobles would be in the palm of Juliana's hand.

The likelihood of her taking the throne would rise exponentially.

Thinking about such things caused Sect to lower his shoulders and look up at the ceiling.

Juliana honed in on his suspicious behavior.

"So? Do you intend to stay here long? Or will you head towards the capital immediately?"

With these words Sect turned back to Juliana and resumed speaking in a cheerful tone.

"We'll rest here tonight, and set out for the capital tomorrow morning."

"Well, you're welcome to use one of the unused wings as your own. I hope you have a good rest."

Juliana was a little bewildered by her brother Sect's offer, but accepted it with proper etiquette and left the room with her associates.

When Juliana had finally left the room, general Setorion stepped from behind Sect and started speaking.

"Is this alright?"

His simple question actually concerned the princess's large strides towards obtaining the throne.

However, Sect sat back in his chair and threw his hands in the air while manically laughing.

"If the trade negotiations are legit, then her backing for the throne will raise by 80%."

"And?"

Sect shook his head at Setorion's short questions.

"This is a baffling situation. Word of Juliana's accomplishment is bound to spread. Due to the recent events, the royal family's standing in the

kingdom is already unstable enough, so this deal needs to go through no matter what..... It's also a little ironic that humans are dependent of the elven minority to secure a stable food source."

Sect chuckled a bit before he resumed speaking.

"I'll need to ensure my control over Hoban is unshakable, I will not allow my little sister to control such an important stopover between Rinburuto and the capital. For the time being, we should inform lord Tiosera about the dangers that accompany switching allegiances."

Setorion silently nodded in agreement to Sect's decisions.

"Given Juliana's disposition, she'll prioritize giving『Abundant Harvest Stones』to the more barren territories. That will likely invoke the ire of the lords with favorable land holdings. If she's aware of the risk, she'll need to keep the『Abundant Harvest Stones』in limited circulation. It won't be too difficult to draw the dissatisfied feudal lords to our side. The power balance has temporarily shifted in her favor, but it should swing back into balance once I gather those opposed to Juliana's monopoly under my banner."

A dauntless smile appeared on the prince's face.

"There's no need to rush when you aim for the throne..... lest you end up like that fool Douglass. I plan to leave the throne to my first son, so I should probably start working on finding a suitable bride."

Having made his declaration, Sect closed his eyes and continued to smile.

Chapter 13: 「Nightmare」

When I regained consciousness I didn't know why I was here.

There was a forest on one side and a grassy plain on the other.

The sun was high in the sky, so it was most likely around noon..... The sound of wind stroking the tree branches managed to reach the rock I was sitting on.

The smell of the moist earth reached my nose. The wind had also blown a few leaves off their branches.

I unintentionally stood up and examined the unfamiliar landscape.

..... Why had I been sitting here?

As I tried to remember what happened to me, I finally noticed my own appearance.

There was a jet black robe covering my entire body and there was a weird staff in my hands.

The staff itself was of an abnormal design and rather long.

It looked as if I were a stereotypical magician.

Although I was confused by my appearance, my body began to move as if on its own.

A black flame was sparked on the end of my staff and without a second of hesitation, the flame was thrown at a tree, instantaneously reducing it to ash.

As the black flames died out, the ashes of the incinerated tree was blown into the forest by another gust of wind.

My body raised the staff again and released the full might of the black flame onto the forest.

An entire section of the forest had became a sacrifice to the test of the magic's full potential, and after the flames died off a good portion of the forest had been destroyed.

The branches and undergrowth that had previously blocked my line of sight were now cleared away..... my body silently walked over the remains of the forest until it eventually came across a simple road.

Without the forest blocking the way, I could easily see down the road.

When my body raised the staff again, a black orb appeared and quickly engulfed my entire body.

The next moment, the black orb had disappeared and my view of the surroundings had changed a bit.

When I looked around I understood what had happened.

The forest I had walked out of was about ten meters behind me. I even saw the trampled down area I had walked through previously.

The spell my body had used was a transfer magic spell.

Seemingly satisfied with the results, my body began to nimbly traverse the forest using transfer magic.

Before long I reached the end of the forest.

The road that snaked through the forest continued on into the hilly area that opened up before me.

When I looked up I saw that the sun still hung near the center of the sky.

I used transfer magic to leave the forest behind and began making my way through the hilly area.

Soon, I came across a luxurious cargo carriage parked beside the road.

However, just from looking at the scene at this distance I understand that this wasn't a mere rest stop.

There were multiple arrows sticking out of the carriage and there was no one sitting in the coachman's seat. There were four horses tethered to the front of the carriage, but one of them had been hit by an arrow.

Next to the carriage, a group of men were fighting one another with shields and swords.

One group of men were wearing similar sets of light body armor and carried the same small shield and short swords. A few of them were also riding their own horse.

The other group that was apparently attacking the carriage's guards had mismatched weapons and armor and were most likely some kind of bandits or highwaymen, given their dirty appearance.

The thieves outnumbered the guards two-to-one and were taking full advantage of it.

The situation had reached the point where the guards were falling one after another to the bandits' attacks.

From my point of view, it was clear that the carriage was mere moments away from falling into the bandits' hands.

My body raised the staff once more and was completely covered by the black sphere again.

In an instant the distance between me and the carriage shortened to about one hundred meters without any of the guards or bandits noticing.

The black flames once again ignited and I began to shoot fireballs at the bandits.

My aim was true as the fireballs struck some of the bandits and flared up into a massive fire pillar, before reducing them to ashes.

"Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!"

The bandits became disorganized as their companions were suddenly burnt alive before their very eyes.

The guards were also confused for a moment as they watched the bandits being consumed by the flames.

One of the bandits finally caught sight of me and pointed me out to everyone else.

"Hooo!!! There's a magician over there!!!"

The bandits focused on me before they charged at me with their

weapons raised.

However, almost all of them were shot down by my black fireballs before they could even reach me.

I burnt any bandit who opposed me to death as I slowly made my way towards the carriage.

Despite the gruesome sight of watching people burn to death in front of me, I felt no pity for the bandits whatsoever.

“Boss! This guy is ridiculously strong!! We’ve gotta run!!”

One of the bandits called out to a nearby large bandit before turning his back on me and running away at full speed.

I pointed my staff at the fleeing man and shot a fireball at him.

The man was reduced to bones after being engulfed in black flames.

“Fuck!! Who are you, bastard!?”

The tall man referred to as boss shouted in irritation and indignation as he threw his weapon at me.

The weapon headed straight for me and managed to catch the hood of my dark cloak.

My face became visible to everyone in the area after my hood fell on my shoulders.

For some reason this caused everyone to freeze for a moment.

Then everyone began moving at once as if their collective switches had been flipped. The bandits scattered in every direction, screaming their heads off, while the guards drew their bows and fired arrows at me.

There wasn’t much distance between me and the guards and the arrows were shot straight at me, but the moment the arrows made contact with my cloak they simply fell the ground.

“Why?”

“!?”

Even though I came to help these people it's come to this. The guards stepped back in shock before one of them started to shout orders to the others.

"You lot go ahead with the carriage!! Two people stay with me to hold this thing back!!"

The supposed guard leader and two nearby guards drew their swords again. The remaining guards untied the wounded horse and set off on the cargo carriage.

When I took a step forward the leader raised his sword and shouted again.

"Don't take another step forward!! You guys flank the thing's right and left!!"

The leader dug his feet into the horse's sides as he said that, making the horse charge at me.

The other two responded by leading their own horses around to my sides.

While my attention had been focused on them, the leader's sword closed in on me in a flash. I was about to dodge the attack using transfer magic, but the two that had flanked me were attacking from behind.

Managing to dodge one of the attacks and block the other one with my staff, I turned around just in time to see the leader leaping from his horse to perform an overhead slash.

A dull, metallic sound rang out and sparks flew as my staff and the leader's sword collided.

"This monster can use some sort of strange magic!!

Blue veins bulged on the leader's forehead as he desperately attempted to sink his sword into my body.

As the leader glared at me while trying to push me back I was able to catch a glimpse of myself reflected in his eyes.

There wasn't a nose or flesh of any kind on the skull that was my head,

and pale red lights sat within my empty eye sockets.

The surprise of seeing my face caused me to touch it with the hand I wasn't using to hold off the leader.

My fingers trembled a little when I felt the lifeless, cold bone that my face had become.

"Return to the earth, undead!!"

The leader took my momentary shock to disengage from our struggle and brandish his sword again.

"……annoying."

Feeling that this affair had become rather troublesome, I raised my staff and launched a fireball at the man. The column of black flame that sprung up instantly reduced the man to a pile of ashes.

"You monster!! Haaaa!!!"

"You're the captain's enemy!!!"

The remaining two guards were enraged at their captain's death and gave me a death glare as the tried to cut me down. However, I managed to dodge within a hair's breath and shoot them down with fireballs.

Once the two guards had been silenced, the only thing that could be heard in the area was the sound of the embers burning on the ground.

I didn't feel much of anything as I looked around and realized that the carriage was already gone.

When I turned towards the direction the carriage had been facing, I could see its backside in the distance.

However, it was only for a brief moment before the carriage crested a hill and disappeared.

I absentmindedly watched the carriage disappear before I looked down at my staff and sighed.

After standing there for a while, I decided to head back towards the forest I had came from.

As day gave way to night, I took a seat on a nearby boulder and looked up at the crimson evening sky.

Having realized my form in this world, I started to think about my future..... as I considered my options, I saw multiple lights appearing over the horizon and after some time passed, I noticed the lights were heading for my current location.

When a group of one hundred horse-riding, spear-wielding soldiers caught sight of me, their eyes reflected an anger hotter than the setting sun.

The armor the soldiers were wearing and the weapons they had seemed to be one step above the guards' equipment and they were all wearing mantles on their backs.

Originally, the mantles had been probably white, but under the setting sun they assumed a red hue similar to the capes of roman centurions.

Leading the soldiers was a man equipped with a luxurious set of armor, who was vigorously raising his weapon in the sky.

When the luxurious knight gave the signal, the ground began to rumble as all the soldiers rushed me simultaneously.

I began hurling black fireballs at my attackers, but it was like throwing pebbles against a massive wave, for when one rider fell several more replaced him.

The cavalry had blocked my ability to escape with transfer magic and spears were quickly approaching me.

Though I tried my best to dodge them, I was repeatedly stabbed by spears which carried enough force to crack some of my bones.

The soldiers at the rear of the wave made sure to lodge their spears into my body when they caught sight of me trying to dodge.

If this had been my original body I'd be dead, but with this body I only felt a slight amount of pain. I casually pulled out the spears, throwing one of them at the group of riders that were charging me once again, nailing

one of them to the ground.

Despite that, the soldiers didn't even flinch and prepared their spears to attack me.

"Depressing……!"

A low toned voice left my mouth as I hit the end of my staff against the ground.

A black sphere appeared at my feet and leaped into the corpses of the dead soldiers.

As the shadows were suck into the corpses, the bones of the deceased began to rise in a ragdoll-like manner. The reanimated corpses picked up their spears and began running towards their former comrades.

The soldiers didn't stop their charge when they saw this, despite the fear and unease that was clearly visible on their faces.

…… Then hell was unleashed upon the soldiers.

The reanimated soldiers suddenly raised their spears to the heavens. Dark tendrils were released from the undead's weapons and jumped at their former comrades.

Holes opened up in the chests of the soldiers' forms with blood and organs flowing out…… soon this quiet hill was reduced to a hellscape as screams and the sound of mortal combat filled the area.

Before long, there were no humans left standing, only the silent group of one hundred soldiers was left standing in the place that had been their grave.

At the center of this group of undead soldiers was a skeleton dressed in a dark robe, who proceeded to hit his staff against the ground before raising it into the sky.

The undead soldiers began to silently and slowly walk down the road that led to the hill.

The day had completely given way to night, and the footsteps of the funeral procession were swallowed by the darkness as they marched

along.

It was at that moment my consciousness faded away.

Chapter 14: 「The Hot Spring's Effect」

When I opened my eyes, I saw a few tree branches through a collapsed ceiling as sunlight shined down on my body.

I remembered having a nightmare, but the details of the dream were vague at best.

I took a deep breath and exhaled the discomfort that had settled within my chest. When I was fully awake, I remember passing out shortly after entering the hot spring.

Raising my stiff neck, I took a look at my surroundings.

I was resting on some sort of stone pedestal. The nearby remains of a cooking stove was leading me to believe that this place had originally been a kitchen.

In that case, this pedestal must have been a counter.

My body was wrapped in one of those fur sleeping bags I've seen at our campsites.

It seemed like I was inside the residence near the mountain top.

Most of the interior had decayed and the weeds growing through cracks in the stone floor blurred the boundary between the outside and the inside, but I could see the walls were still in good shape.

The counter I was resting on had been cleaned up a bit so that it could be used as a substitute for a bed.

Next to me was a curled up, lightly snoring furball that would occasionally wag its fluffy tail.

My movements made the furball stir and it focused its sleepy eyes on me before it started to bark happily..

"Kyun! Kyu〜n♪"

Ponta jumped on my face and began licking me with her small tongue.

"Hey! Stop it, that tickles."

When I managed to tear the overly happy Ponta from my face, I caught sight of my current appearance.

“Uhg, I’ve turned back……”

The body I had regained entering the hot spring had now reverted back to that of a skeleton.

I was also stark naked, like I had been when I entered the spring.

I wouldn’t feel all that embarrassed if my skeletal body was seen by someone else, but I was worried about my armor, so I started looking for it.

That’s when Ariane threw open the room’s entrance. She went wide-eyed when she saw me sitting up.

“Arc!? You’re awake!!?”

Ariane dropped the basket of wild plants in her hands and ran towards me as she called out my name.

When I saw a small tear in the corner of her eyes, I scratched my head because of how uncomfortable it made me feel.

…… I seem to have made her worry.

“Ye-Yeah. I just woke up a little while ago…… How long was I unconscious?”

Though I’d been thrown off by her behavior, when I asked her how long I’d been out cold, she started looking as if she was remembering something before nodding once.

“It’s been seven days since you fainted, Arc. Chiome-chan and I were thinking about asking Williahsfim-sama fly us back to the village so you could receive proper treatment.”

“I’ve been unconscious for seven days!?”

I wasn’t able to hide my surprise at her response.

It didn’t seem like more than an hour had passed since I had fainted, so I couldn’t believe that days had passed.

……I think now I know how Urashima Taro must have felt.

While I was lost in thought another person entered the room and called my name.

“Arc-dono! You’re awake.”

Chiome had appeared in her usual ninja garb, holding a basket of wild plants and nuts like the one Ariane had been carrying, and her cat ears were also restlessly twitching on her head.

“Ah, Chiome-dono. Sorry for making you guys worry.”

Ariane crossed her arms ad looked a bit irritated when I finished speaking.

“Really. Arc, we couldn’t even check if you had a heartbeat or not, and

you looked like nothing but remains as you slept."

In other words, it had been uncertain whether I would return or not. It wouldn't have been strange for them to assume I had died and bury me.

"Sorry, Ariane-dono. I never intended to make you wait for seven days..... Speaking of which, why did you wait seven days to see if I was alive or not?"

If it had been me, I wouldn't have had the patience to watch a mysterious set of bones for seven days. I'd have given up after the second day.

When I asked Ariane about it, her golden eyes bulged for a moment before she turned away, "I-It wasn't that big of a deal....."

While I was confused by Ariane's reaction, I began to wonder how someone could possibly judge if I was alive, dead or unconscious. Ariane then said " Oh, yeah....." and quickly changed the topic.

"Arc, you did say that you were human, right? But when the spring removed your curse, why did you appear to be an elf!?"

I was reminded of my appearance before I passed out when Ariane asked that question.

Of course, that body hadn't been my original one. However, that elven form was familiar to me.....

It was my avatar's appearance before I equipped the skeleton skin.

I had made it look like a dark elf in the game, but its long ears, brown skin, black hair and red eyes were completely different from dark elves in this world.

Ariane's golden eyes were staring directly at me and were demanding an explanation.

I averted my eyes and stroked my chin as I tried to come up with something to say.

".....Well, I thought I was human....."

All I could manage was a vague response.

“It seems like my memory isn’t all that reliable.”

Although I know the true reason behind everything, I doubted that they could understand it even if I told them.

So I wouldn’t say anything else on the matter.

Ariane and Chiome shared a look and simultaneously sighed in defeat showing no interest in pressing my any further.

While I was thankful for this, I sighed and looked down at my own body.

“Though I was sure that he was an elf, given his ears, everything else about him was just too different to be certain. And the person himself doesn’t even know……”

As Ariane voiced her complaints Chiome simply turned her eyes on me.

I was a skeleton in a knight’s armor, a dark elf when the curse was lifted, and I had the mind of a human. It was like this body was a nested doll…… I shook my head to clear away my worries.

Beside that……

“Why did I pass out after I entered the hot spring?”

Before I passed out I remembered a torrent of negative emotions I haven’t felt since I came to this world assaulting my mind like a storm.

I voiced my worries about why that had happened to me.

“Probably because of that curse of yours reacting to the spring’s effects.”

I suddenly heard a familiar voice from above my head.

Both Ariane and Chiome looked up when they heard the voice, so I followed their example.

What I saw was a creature I’ve never seen before floating and looking down on us.

“Kyun!”

Ponta wasn't all that cautious towards that being, instead she wagged her tail and called out to him as if she knew him.

The floating being shook the ground as it descended to my eye level like a Demon King.

I couldn't understand the nature of this person, but Ponta didn't seem too worried about him. As I struggled to figure out how I should react to this person, Ariane spoke up and revealed his identity.

"This is Williahsfim-sama. Once Dragon Kings reach a certain age, they gain the ability to take on a human form."

"What?!"

A let out a shocked shout and snapped my head towards him.

The creature seemed humanoid with its arms and legs.

This form wasn't nearly as large as his bulky thirty-meter long body for sure.

However, could that really be called a human form?

His body was covered in the same majestic blue scales as his dragon form, his head resembled a dragon's more than human's, as he smiled I could see that his mouth was full of fangs instead of teeth and he had two horns growing from the side of his head.

His body was covered in a set of armor the same color as his scales, a small set of wings were folded against his back and there was a long tail connected to his waist that reached the floor.

In this humanoid form, Williahsfim stood well over four meters tall, a giant compared to regular humans.

Instead of a human, it would be better to call him a giant lizardman. I stared directly at Williahsfim as I processed all of this.

While I still had questions about his appearance, my current situation came first.

"Williahsfim-dono, what do you mean by that?"

Williahsfim nodded his head at my question and narrowed his reptilian eyes at me, “From what I’m seeing, this boy here is originally from another world. When the spring temporarily returned his body to its original state, he received a backlash because of that. Though even I don’t understand how he can function in such an incomplete state……”

“Another world……”

Williahsfim wound up speaking a troublesome phrase in his explanation.

“Hmm. It’s a little difficult to explain to others, but there are other worlds that overlap with this one and the rest of this boy’s being has been left behind in one of them.”

Worlds overlapping one another…… or alternate realities, I turned to Ariane and Chiome to see how they felt after learning my origins.

However, the two of them were looking between Williahsfim and me in confusion.

When Williahsfim saw the state they were in, he tried to find a better way to explain it.

“How should I put it…… Well, there exists a world composed entirely of energy without any physical form, that world is where spirits in this world originate. There are also other worlds that are tangentially connected to this one.”

The two of them scratched their chins and nodded several times as if they understood what Williahsfim said to some extent.

“I see. So when the hot spring restored my body the shock was too much for me to take and the mental fatigue knocked me unconscious…… or something like that?”

The shift from a skeletal body to a dark elf body being too much for me to take was something I could understand.

What I was more concerned about to the explosive storm of emotions that had hit me.

When I asked Williahsfim he slowly ran his eyes over my body before he began speaking again.

"I suppose it should be called a curse after all..... Boy, when you're a skeleton, are you capable of feeling deep emotions?"

I thought back to all that I had done since I came to this world when he asked me that.

I was continuously bombarded with various surprises nearly every day since I've been here, yet I never was too upset or even sad about what I've experienced.

When I learned about the circumstances of the elves and the People of the Mountains and Plains, I didn't hesitate to offer my strength, but it wasn't out of a sense of justice.

I acted so indifferently to what I experienced in this world because I still considered all of it a game or a dream. I thought my standing in life here would improve if I helped the people living here so I did.

"When you regained your body, all of the pent up emotions from your time as a skeleton poured into you. The burden of that experience caused you to faint."

Ariane and Chiome stared at me in amazement when Williahsfim finished speaking and I myself looked down at my boney body.

I guess that explained why I passed out.

"Williahsfim-dono, how do you know so much about this matter?"

As much as I could accept that a long-lived Dragon King would have amassed more wisdom than me, but I had to question how he could spout knowledge about the universe so easily.

Williahsfim smiled at my question before he answered.

"Dragon Kings are entirely different beings from the dragons that live in the mountains. That is to say, we are powerful spirits that created our current bodies."

My gaze unintentionally traveled to Ponta as she let out a large yawn.

“Kyun?”

Williahsfim realized what I was thinking and quickly corrected me.

“We’re different from spirit beasts. Spirit beasts are just animals that assimilated elemental spirits into themselves, I crafted my own body before I entered this world. The power to take human form is an extension of that ability. I simply shrunk my dragon form into what you see before you.”

Williahsfim stood a bit taller as he said that.

Despite the oppressive aura of their normal bodies, Dragon Kings were rather spiritual beings.

“I see..... Still, if I’m going to have that reaction every time I enter the hot spring, then it just isn’t worth it for a temporary solution.....”

When I lowered my head after saying that, I caught Ariane looking at me as if she had something to say about the matter.

However, this was a rather personal issue for me.....

At that moment, Williahsfim spoke up once again to explain the situation with the spring.

“You’re wrong, boy. Even if you can’t maintain your original body in the future, it should be fine to enter the spring as long as you keep your emotional distress to a minimum. It could be considered a miracle that you survived the experience this time.”

I looked up at him the second I realized the meaning behind his words.

It’s barely been a month since I entered this world as a skeleton. All this time, my negative and strong emotions had been accumulating.

If it had been a year or even two months before they were allowed to flood my mind, then I doubt I would have been out of commission for just seven days.

My life might’ve been at risk.

If I was to live in this incredibly harsh world, then the emotional limiter

that came along with my skeletal body would certainly be a useful tool, but the price for using it is truly worthy of being called a ‘curse’.

I could never have imagined that a simple choice in a game would have so much of an effect on my life, but now was not the time or place to grieve over it.

Right now I needed to determine how long I could stay in my elven body and the time limit I could endure being a skeleton.

“I think I need to experiment with the hot spring for a bit……”

Chapter 15: 「New Home」

I was standing in front of the hot spring responsible for my seven-day coma.

The huge open-air bath spread out behind the decaying residence, so Hanzo, the previous resident, must've built and maintained this place.

A stream of hot water was endlessly flowing into the area from a slightly elevated rock formation. The water was flowing into a hollowed out groove and to prevent the water from overflowing, there was a cliff at the groove that allowed excess water to be drained off.

In this huge open-air bath, a four-meter-tall blue-scaled giant was relaxing in the water with his back against a nearby rock.

Apparently, ever since Hanzo's time, Dragon King Williahsfim has regularly donned his humanoid form to visit the spring.

Honestly, as he sank deeper into the water and sighed, he reminded me of the Japanese macaques at the jigokudani hot springs.

Williahsfim turned his head in my direction and called out to me.

"Boy, how long are you going to sit there?"

I had been sitting at the edge of the hot spring repeatedly dipping my toes into the water and taking them out once they regained their flesh when he had called out to me.

The shock I experienced before made me hesitant about entering the spring.

While I couldn't feel strong emotions as a skeleton, decision making was another matter.

I knew that I couldn't sit here forever, looking at the water, and resolved myself to getting in.

However, the emotional backlash I felt the first time..... was something I didn't want to experience again.....

"Namusan!!"

With a final mantra to raise my spirits, I soaked my entire skeletal body into the water.

I closed my eyes and braced myself for the backlash when I resurfaced. However, I felt nothing like it rising up, so opened my eyes and took a look around.

Apart from a slight skin-crawling sensation, there was no sign of the overwhelming torrent swelling up.

Since my last trip into the hot spring took me out of commission for several days, I didn't seem to have accumulated much emotional distress.

Meaning that the backlash from the entering the spring again was minuscule.

I breathed a relieved sigh and let the hot water embrace my body.

"Ahh〜〜"

From now on I was going to have to soak in this spring on a regular basis.

It was a mandatory precaution if I wanted to keep my emotional distress to a minimum.

Just like I bathed every day in my former life, I just had to come here every day. Maybe once in the morning and once at night.

I'd like to avoid being consumed by that torrent after all.

I splashed my face and sighed as I reflected on my life in this world.

As my body reverted back to flesh and blood, I recalled my past actions. While I certainly felt bad about all the people I killed, the hot spring's warmth seeping into my core allowed me to cope somehow.

While I let the water drain away my regrets and worries, I began to look towards my future.

Though it was not the body I sought, I have achieved my main goal of restoring it.

I watched as the dark elf's face reflected in the water changed

expressions when I tugged at one of my long ears.

How about we start with measuring the duration of this hot spring's effect.

I moved to the edge of the spring and left only my feet submerged.

This dark elf body was my previous avatar before I bought the skeletal skin, and its dark skinned muscles were splendidly toned.

I had a weird desire to flex my abs just for the heck of it.

However, there'd be no point in flaunting my muscles now.

Right now I need to observe the effect the spring had on my body.

After a few minutes of being out of the water, my upper body became slightly transparent before reverting back to bones.

Only my feet maintained their form. A skeleton looking like it was wearing flesh socks was a rather strange and unsettling sight to behold.

I raised one of my feet from the water and stared at the boundary between flesh and bone.

Apparently, I revert back to my skeletal form after ten minutes.

After a quick dunk back into the water, I made my way over to where the hot spring began, scooped some water in my hands and drank it.

While it didn't have any particular taste, the water slid down my throat and warmed up my stomach.

Just like before, I made my way to the edge of the spring and stared down at my body.

The flesh remained even after the ten-minute mark passed, with no sign of disappearing.

"Williahsfim-dono, would you happen to know of a way to cure me completely?"

When I turned back to the Dragon King and asked him a question, I saw that his tail was floating on the water's surface before he looked at me and answered, "Boy, I don't know the details of your particular curse and

from what I've seen, it is dependent on your very being. How was that curse placed on you in the first place?"

Williahsfim snorted at me after he answered me and I gave up asking questions about it.

I received this skeletal body when I came to this world, therefore this curse was something beyond this reality.

The reason behind this was something only the gods knew.

It was my philosophy not to worry about such things.

Shaking my head, I asked Williahsfim about another important matter.

"Williahsfim-dono, would you mind if I set up a home in this area?"

"..... Do as you like. Originally, this place belonged to the first leader of that cat's clan, as long as you don't bother my tree, I don't mind you staying here."

Williahsfim sunk his mouth under the water and began blowing bubbles with his eyes closed when he was done talking.

"Thank you....."

I left the hot spring after I bowed my head in gratitude.

There was a dressing room in the back of the residence that I was using to put my armor back on when I realized something.

"Hmm, there's no need to wear the entire set in this place....."

After thinking aloud, I only put on the lower body section of my armor.

Besides, if I wore the whole suit of armor I wouldn't be able to tell when the effect wore off.

With my upper body still exposed, I performed a side chest pose. The veins in my arms stood out as I fixed my muscles.

"I wish I had a full-body mirror here."

Adding a body-length mirror to the list of things I needed to buy for my new home, I headed towards the room Ariane was in.

The dressing room I left was connected to a large hall that looked like a small meadow, thanks to the grass that had been growing between the cracks in the floor.

When I found Ariane and Chiome, the two of them seemed to be in the middle of a long discussion.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, Ariane-dono.”

When I called out to her, Ariane looked up at me with a shocked expression on her face.

“Arc, that appearance..... has the curse been broken? Is your body alright?”

“Again, I’m sorry for worrying the both of you, there’s nothing wrong with my body. According to Williahsfim-dono, the only way for me to maintain this form is to constantly drink the hot spring’s water, so now I’m testing the duration of its effects.”

When I answered her question I tried to emphasize my trapezius muscles.

Ariane made a strange face as she looked at me.

“I understand, but why are you walking around like that?”

“Ho, I just wanted to enjoy having a body again, is that weird?”

I flexed my abs as I answered her question.

“No, it’s just that you look like my grandfather. I thought you were doing that because it’s stuffy in here.”

My shoulders drooped at Ariane’s biting words just as Ponta ran into the room and used wind magic to fly at me.

“Ky-uh!”

Lifted by a sudden breeze, Ponta landed on my head and began wagging her fluffy tail over my face.

Ariane fell silent when she saw that before she had a revelation.

“It makes sense for a spirit beast to bond with Arc, since he’s an elf.....

Say Arc, can you see these?"

She blew her breath into her hand and showed it to me.

In her hand were the strange lights that I had seen her use during the escapade in Lanbaltic.

"...? I can't see them all that well, but I do see some lights there....."

When I answer Ariane's question she nodded and closed her hand with the lights in it.

"I thought so. Arc, you're capable of seeing spirits."

"But Ariane-dono, why couldn't I detect the taint of the undead or see any spirits in Great Canada Forest?"

Ariane had an answer for my question, though.

"Though it's an elven trait, there are differences between individuals. Judging from your build, I would assume you're closely related to dark elves, Arc."

I was reminded of the characteristic of the elves in this world as she said that.

While all elves had a high aptitude for magic, dark elves had the additional advantage of higher physical strength.

My body did closely resemble dark elves. However I only made my avatar look like a dark elf, so it was still up in the air if I was a true elf or not.

Well, I suppose demonstrating the racial ability to see the spirits could be taken as proof of that.

From what I've heard, the first leader of Great Canada Forest, someone who had probably been in the same position as me, also had the ability to see spirits. However, based on what Ariane said about them, their ability with this skill was stronger than mine.

"It'd be for the best to inform the elders about Arc once we return to the village....."

When Ariane began making plans for the future, she suddenly stopped and turned to Chiome as if remembering something important "Chiome-chan wasn't there something you wanted to discuss with Arc?"

When she said that, Chiome, who had remained silent till now, lowered her head to me as her cat ears lightly twitched.

"Hmm?"

"Arc-dono, do you remember the rescue mission you and Ariane-dono took part in during our time in the capital? Well, we wound up saving more people than that the village was capable of supporting. Because an abundant amount of monsters live in the mountains, there is little room for crop cultivation and the village had already been reaching the limits of its sustainability before that....."

As she spoke about her village's current situation, Chiome's tail hung low and her shoulders drooped.

I nodded at her explanation and urged her to continue.

"That is why I was ordered by the twenty-second generation clan head to find lord Hanzo's former residence as a possible site for a new village."

So her clan wasn't simply looking for the previous residence of their founder, they were trying to find a new home for their brethren.

While showing understanding of her circumstances, I brought up some of the concerns I had.

"I require the spring in order to maintain my body and I received permission from Williahsfim-dono to set up a new home here..... That won't be a problem, will it?"

Ariane and Chiome shared a surprised looked when they heard this, before Chiome's clear blue eyes looked back at me and responded.

"That's fine. Williahsfim-dono gave me permission as well..... but we're not planning to set up the village close the Dragon King's home. There is a plain adjacent to a large lake just east of here that the Dragon King showed us."

The area must have been an easier place for people to live.

The hot spring was located at the top of a mountain and the only building was this rundown house. While it was fine for a small group of people, it would be problematic for a larger group to live here.

When I looked over these lands after exiting the cavern, I saw that it was a basin completely surrounded by mountains, making it an easily defendable home.

There was also plenty of room for the People of the Mountain and Plains to live.

However, if the land was available, why didn't the first head move his people here?

When I asked Chiome about it, she shook her head and answered.

"I don't know myself. The reason was from many generations ago, so the twenty-second head might be aware of the details."

I could think of a few reasons for that.

While the land would be difficult for humans to invade, it also made it difficult for allies to visit as well.

The journey to this place required one to traverse a monster-filled forest and finding their way through a dank, dark cavern since the mountains were inhabited by furious dragons.

Even if the People of the Mountains and Plains had superior physical prowess, the danger involved moving a large number of people is clearly apparent.

In other words……

"The current conditions in Chiome-dono's village have reached the point where your leader wants to negotiate the use of my transfer magic in the upcoming migration?"

When I made my guess, Chiome's ears went stiff as her eye looked at me in anticipation.

“……Yes! Once again, please offer us your assistance Arc-dono.”

My answer was already decided.

” I plan to make this place my home, so I might as well meet with the descendants of this place’s former owner. I’m not that good at talking, but there’s no need for any more negotiations as long as I receive this place as a reward. Because of my curse, I can’t afford to give it up.”

Chiome smiled when I said that and her cheeks became flushed as her tail wagged despite her attempts to maintain her composure.

“Thank you very much, Arc-dono.”

“By the way, what do you want to do, Ariane-dono? Do you want to return to Raratoia first? I’ve already made you watch over me for seven days.”

When I asked Ariane, who had quietly listened to the story up till now, she stroked her chin and held her other arm against her voluptuous chest as she thought it over.

“Since the trip here and back to the village would normally take more than seven days there’s no need to worry about it. While you slept, I promised Chiome-chan that I’d also visit her village.”

The two of them shared as smile when she said that.

I could only awkwardly scratch my head at the feeling of comradely that the two of them seemed to have forged while I had been asleep.

Ponta patted my head with her tail as a means to confront me.

“Ponta, I’ll give you a delicious treat later.”

“Kyun♪”

Hearing Ponta’s cheer and patting her head helped relieve some of my anxiety, but the arm I was petting her with suddenly became transparent and skeletal again.

“Hmm?”

I had neglected to keep track of the time, so it was rather unexpected

when my body disappeared as if it had been an illusion.

It had probably been close to an hour since I drank the hot spring's water.

"You turned back..... the effect time seems rather short."

While Ariane was shocked at the sudden change, she still managed a biting comment about the hot spring.

While the effect was short, it was still better than when I had simply soaked in the hot spring.

Now I should increase the quantity of water to verify an exact time limit.

I'll have to change my plans to account for this in the future.

Chapter 16: 「That Which is Inherited」

As the day weaned and the sky turned a dark crimson, the mountaintop took on a calming stillness.

The breeze coming in from the collapsed roof gently brushed against my skin and caused the grass that grew from the cracks in the floor to sway.

I silently opened my eyes and looked down at the thick patch of grass in front of me before I crouched down and waved my hand in a slashing motion through a modified magic circle.

“【Wind Blade】”

【Wind Blade】was a basic spell from the wind magic system, and an invisible blade cut down the patch of grass when I invoked it.

The grass blades scattered on the stone floor without a sound.

While it was a basic spell, it’s power had been greatly suppressed so I could limit its the range and strength.

“Kyun! Kyun!”

Ponta, who’d been watching me till now, uttered a cry all of a sudden.

“Oh, you wanna try Ponta?”

“Kyun!”

When I said that, Ponta began wagging her fluffy tail and took a step forward.

“KyuKyu-n……”

With a spirited cry, Ponta took a fighting stance and started to focus on the sapling that was growing in front of her.

Ponta’s light green fur started to glow after a while as a whirlwind began to blow up the fallen leaves around her.

“Kyun!”

With a spirited shout, a gust of wind was fired from Ponta’s whirlwind.

The sapling's leaves scattered about as it was cut down at the base.

"Good job! How about some roasted beans as a reward?"

"Kyun☆"

I was impressed with Ponta's magic so I reached into the leather sack tied to my waist for her reward when Ariane spoke up from behind me.

"Wait a minute Arc, what dangerous things are you teaching Ponta?"

When I looked back I saw that she was staring at me with a raised eyebrow and her arms crossed.

"Since this is going to be my future home, I decided to do a bit of weeding. Ponta just started to replicate the magic I used to cut down weeds and trees. Don't fluffy foxes normally use offensive measures against enemies?"

While I tried to defend myself, Ponta tilted her head and had a look in her eyes as if she were asking 'what about the roasted beans?'.

Ariane looked conflicted for a second as she looked down at Ponta before answering me.

"There's not much known about the habits of fluffy foxes..... but I've never heard of one using magic offensively."

"I see. Perhaps they learn it when they grow up, but it wouldn't hurt for Ponta learn how to defend herself."

"I guess you have a point but..... Ah, Arc, your body is starting to turn back."

Ariane still seemed a little doubtful about the matter, but she changed topics when she noticed me starting to change.

"Yeah, the duration of the spring's effect changes depending on the amount of spring water I drink."

This time I drank about a liter of water and the effects lasted for about three hours.

The brown skin of my upper body disappeared, leaving only the bones

behind. I stroked my ribcage to confirm my current state.

When I told Ariane the effective time she simply sighed and shrugged.

“That’s a rather constricted limit.”

Ariane wasn’t wrong about the limited ability to maintain an actual body. Still, it was way better than the three minutes certain giant heroes from the M78 nebulae received.

Although I felt that the effective time slightly decreased whenever I exerted myself.

The power of the hot spring seemed to be consumed by my movements, though I couldn’t get a straight answer from Williasfrim when I asked him why.

While I was getting lost in thought about the hot spring, Ariane remembered the reason she had come here.

“Oh yeah, dinner is ready. Chiome-chan made it today.”

“Kyun!”

What a spirited cry, Ponta stopped looking up at me for roasted beans and left to seek out Chiome.

“Okay. Tomorrow I should be ready to go to Rhoden Kingdom’s capital. How about we prepare to set off for the hidden village from there?”

Ariane was still looking at Ponta’s back when I made my suggestion for tomorrow, and she answered me without turning away from Ponta.

“That’s fine. Chiome-chan did invite me and I would like to see one of her people’s villages as soon as possible. We should get going as well.”

Ariane urges us towards the kitchen area where Chiome was waiting.

When I entered the kitchen I saw that a fire had been lit in the hearth and was faintly illuminating the room. The sound of firewood crackling could be heard from the hearth while steam rose from a simmering pot.

As the pot cooked, Chiome’s triangular ears would twitch along with the crackling firewood. After checking the taste, Chiome used a large

spoon to stir the pot while Ponta waited nearby for supper.

"Tonight's dinner are wild vegetables and chicken soup, a dish made when someone is sick. It's one of my villages staple dishes, given its nutritional value."

Chiome picked out a piece of the wild chicken from the pot and gave the portion to Ponta while telling us the contents of tonight's meal.

When the hot piece of chicken was placed in front of her, Ponta used her magic to cool it.

Apparently the first meal since I lost consciousness would be a Blade Heart Clan health dish.

……Even though I wasn't exactly sick……

I guess I should be grateful that this skeletal body allowed me to survive without food and water. I doubted there were infusion pumps in this world and I would have passed away from dehydration otherwise.

"Thank you for the meal."

I offered Chiome my thanks as she handed me my wooden bowl of soup.

The boiled chicken was rather bland and soft, thanks to the fat being dispersed throughout the pot of soup. The vegetables and medicinal herbs in the soup also had a slightly bitter taste to them.

It would be selfish of me to say the soup wasn't to my liking, though.

The thought of having a soy base or turning it into a consommé to improve the taste crossed my mind as I sipped the soup.

"…… is the taste unsatisfactory, Arc-dono?"

Chiome appeared to be a little anxious as she watched me slowly sipping the soup.

"No, sorry. I was just thinking of something else. On top of being good for you, it's also close to how I like my soup."

As I chuckled after saying that, Ariane pointed at me with her spoon.

"Arc, your body is back."

“Huh? Oh.”

Just as she had said, my skeletal body had turned into that of a dark elf when I looked down at myself.

“Sorry, Arc-dono. This is because I used the hot spring water in the soup. Since certain seasonings aren’t as available here as they are in my village, I used the water as a substitute.”

When Chiome apologetically lowered her head to me, I quickly shook my hand and tried to change the topic.

“No, it’s alright. So..... your village has difficulties to obtain salt. How is the supply maintained? Can it be produced once the people are moved here?”

Salt was an indispensable commodity for people. While it was possible to purify it from the sea, this basin was surrounded by an extensive mountain range.

It would be good if there was a rocksalt bed, but it was unlikely that one of those could be found overnight.

When I pointed that out, Chiome turned to Ariane.

“There are a few places near the village where we mine salt, though it’ll be necessary to find a salt bed when the construction of the village is underway. Ariane-dono promised to arrange negotiations with Raratoia’s elder to have the elves accommodate us until then.”

Ariane nodded in acknowledgment after Chiome finished speaking.

They seem to have discussed quite a few things while I was out of commission.

“Looks like you two had a lot to talk about while I was indisposed. Have you already finished your business here then?”

Chiome gave me a small nod before replying.

“Yes. The two of us managed to find a『Spirit Contract Crystal』that lord Hanzo had left behind in this residence.”

“『Spirit Contract Crystal』?”

When she spoke of an unknown item, I remembered Williasfrim said something about her ‘receiving a spirit crystal’ when we first met.

In response to my question, Chiome set aside her bowl and pulled down the ninja garb around her chest.

When her white skin was laid bare in the firelit kitchen, a large, glittering, rhombic jewel was revealed to be set in the center of her chest.

The jewel almost seemed alive as it pulsated and repeatedly released faint bursts of light.

“I’ve already told Ariane-dono, but I’m able to use advanced-level ninjutsu because I’m fused with this spirit crystal. This is a magic tool that has been passed down since the generation of Lord Hanzo the First, one that allows its users to form contracts with compatible elemental spirits.”

Her cheeks became vermilion as she spoke and she frantically hid her chest when I leaned in to examine the jewel.

Judging by the strange pressure I felt directed at me, it’d be better if I pretended to not have seen anything. After faking a cough, I raised my bowl of soup to my lips and took a sip.

“There certainly are a variety of magical tools in this world.”

Chiome’s cat ears lowered a bit and she sighed when she heard my frank comment about the magic tools I’ve never seen before.

“So Arc-dono doesn’t know their origin either..... Since you came from the same country as Hanzo the First, I’d hoped that you would have known.....”

At Chiome’s remark, Ariane’s pointed ears perked up a bit and she turned to me with a doubtful expression on her face.

“Huh? Arc, you’re from the same country as the founder of Chiome-chan’s village? If I remember correctly Hanzo was a human, wasn’t he?

Ariane’s question reminded me that I’ve told Chiome something about

coming from the same country as her clan's founder when I explained how I knew the word 'ninja'.

At the time, I had believed myself to be human in this world, like the founder had been, having forgotten about the elf specifications I currently had.

"..... I thought of myself to have been human. There seem to be various inconsistencies in my memory."

Since I couldn't think of anything better I feigned ignorance.

Ariane groaned and raised an eyebrow at my ambiguous answer.

In order to avoid more scrutiny, I asked Chiome another question.

"I take it that there aren't many of those crystals left, given that their origin is unknown?"

Chiome stroked the spirit crystal beneath her ninja grab before she answered my question.

".....Yes. According to legend, Hanzo the First entrusted ten『Spirit Contract Crystals』to the clan, and there haven't been any rumors about similar magic tools anywhere else. The village has a hold of eight of them, and the one we found here makes nine. I've heard that the final one was lost a long time ago. The fighting potential of the village would certainly increase if there were more of them....."

Did the clan founder bring those magic tools into the world with him, or were they something he crafted after arriving here? At the very least, I've never heard of an item like that.

"Is it possible to remove the crystal after you've fused with it?"

"It can be removed upon my death. When the current user dies, the crystal is passed on to the most qualified candidate among the current generation's six great shinobi."

Her words and expression didn't belong to a young girl, they carried the presence of a soldier willing to fight and die for their village and people.

There was nothing I could say in the presence of Chiome's conviction,

so I simply moved to our plans for tomorrow.

"We should be all set to head for the hidden village by tomorrow. I'll be sure to treat you along the way, Chiome-dono."

Chiome silently bowed her head in gratitude at my words.

Chapter 17: 「The Hidden Village」 Part 1

Early the next morning, before the sun appeared in the sky……

The base of the mountain the Dragon King's Tree sat on was covered in mist that created a truly breathtaking view.

Once we said our farewells to the Dragon King, who was still bathing in the hot spring, I invoked【Transfer Gate】to take us to Rhoden's capital, the closest location I knew to the Blade Heart Clan's village.

The breathtaking scenery of the Dragon King's Tree piercing the sky was instantly replaced by an open prairie that was half converted to farmland.

The capital's southern wall was barely visible from where we stood and the morning fog could be seen blanketing the cityscape.

The still drowsy Ponta let out a big yawn on top of my helmet before she slid down a little bit.

When I looked back, I could see the nearby forest that surrounded the Calcutta Mountain Range.

Since the Blade Heart Clan's hidden village was located at the base of one of those mountains and there was no direct route there, Chiome led the way.

While only a few monsters would appear in the shallow sections of the forest, groups of bandits would occasionally set up their bases here.

"The bandits set up base, but they should all be cleared out soon……"

Chiome began her explanation about the area as she brazenly made her way into the forest's depths.

This place was a suitable thieves den thanks to the closeness of the capital and the distance from the major highways.

If they were going to be cleared out soon, then……

"Chiome-dono, does your clan police this area as part their territory?"

When I said that, Chiome stopped walking and looked back at me.

“What do you think a ninja’s usual work is?”

While I was confused by her sudden question, I thought about their behavior so far and answered her.

“Isn’t it to gather intelligence and free your captured brethren?”

Chiome smiled a little at my answer.

“While that is certainly part of it, bandit hunting is my main job since knives and metal ores are rare commodities in my village and bandit dens are easy prey for the clan. The agents we have placed throughout the city collect information on the bandits and relay it to the village, and then the ninja corps is dispatched to attack their base.”

Ariane seemed rather impressed as she nodded at Chiome’s explanation.

Given the dangers of stealing in the capital under the watchful eyes of those in power, it was the wiser choice to attack bandits outside the city.

Based on what I saw of her during the raid of the Etsuato company, it wasn’t hard to imagine Chiome cutting down average people without much difficulty.

“Chiome-dono, how do you avoid suspicions about the People of the Mountains and Plains’ involvement when you take the bandits’ supplies after killing them?”

“It’s thanks to our agents. When news of bandits spreads through the city, they stage a fake attack and claim that they killed the bandits when they escaped. Everything is fine as long as the rumor of the claim spreads among the humans. When people are sent to investigate the bandits’ base it appears as if they had moved. Thanks to us, the damage caused by bandits around the Calcutta mountains is rather minimal.”

Chiome’s tail rose proudly as she said that and resumed making her way through the forest.

The People of the Plains and Mountains lived a more robust life then I

imagined.

We cautiously made our way towards the mountains, moving through the undergrowth and trees until the scenery eventually opened up.

Somehow we were already halfway up a small mountain.

The ground became more rocky and ragged as we passed over the top and descended into the deep ravine beyond it. When I looked into the depths below, I could see a thin layer of fog between the nearby mountains.

Chiome pointed to a mountain on the opposite side of the ravine then looked back at us.

“Beyond that mountain is the true Calcutta Mountain Range. Because strong monsters dwell in that area, humans rarely set foot there.”

Nodding at her explanation, I glanced at the mountain upon understanding her intentions.

The trees were sparsely placed in on the mountain, so it should be easy to transfer there.

“I think I can reach the opposite mountain from here.”

Ariane and Chiome nodded before they placed their hands on my shoulder as if they were used to it. Once they were ready, I invoked my transfer magic.

“【Dimensional Step】”

My view changed instantly, we were now facing the open area behind the opposing mountain, I could even see where we had been standing when I looked back.

“The village is just beyond these mountains, let’s go.”

I nodded when Chiome urged me on and continued to trek deeper into the mountain range.

The Calcutta Mountain Range was literally several mountains connected to each other. However, in-between the peaks and valleys were

areas of densely packed forest.

Just as Chiome had said, the figures of fierce monsters would appear every now and again, raising the danger of the trek even higher.

The three of us weren't having too much difficulty advancing, but if humans encountered even one of the monsters we came across, they would label this land uninhabitable due to them being constantly preyed upon.

While those that lived here wouldn't have to worry about human encroachment, they did so at the risk of their own lives.

I was a little scared to think of the fate that might have befell the multiple women and children we rescued from the capital.

Currently, I was carrying on my back the dead body of the large ferocious monster that had attacked us a while ago as we walked.

Chiome and Ariane had called the monster an Umbra Tiger, a powerful monster that inhabited mountainous regions and said that an entire squad would normally be dispatched to deal with one of them.

It was about four meters tall and five meters long from head to tail. The tiger-like monster had fangs on its upper jaw that reminded me of a sabretooth tiger, its eyes were blood red, two purple horns grew from his head, and its whole body was covered in black fur.

The monster was normally nocturnal, but I happened to come across it when I was pushing some foliage aside.

Normally the creature would blend into the night as it preyed upon its victims, but a large, black tiger in broad daylight was hard to miss.

Faster than the instant noodles from my former world could cook, the three of us had slain the Umbra Tiger.

"Sorry, Arc-dono. It's not too heavy is it?"

Chiome suddenly looked back at me with a worried expression.

It was her request that we take the Umbra Tiger with us.

When the purple horns on its head were filed down, they could be shaped into knives stronger and sharper than steel.

In fact, the dagger Chiome carried was made from one such horn.

In addition, its fur could be tailored into a coat useful for mountain winters, and the large fangs could be ground into medicine. The fur and fangs were also a luxurious item for humans and could be sold to raise funds for food and weapons.

“It doesn’t weigh as much as the Giant Basilisk I killed before.”

I lightly bounced the Umbra Tiger on my shoulder and chuckled when I said that.

Ariane, who was carrying Ponta beneath her breast, made an amazed comment when she heard that.

“Arc you’re beyond normal in a different way from mother……”

“It’s a little embarrassing to receive praise from you.”

Ariane had an unreadable expression on her face when I made my joking remark.

Maybe she hadn’t been complementing me.

Chiome had continued to lead us through a patch of densely packed forest as we talked. When we cleared the area she pointed out a mountain on the other side of a steep cliff.

“My village is in front of that mountain. We should arrive before nightfall. That is, if we continue at our current pace without stopping.”

Chiome’s gaze traveled up the mountain as she said so.

“Then let’s cover the rest of the distance. Chiome, we can take a rest once we reach the village, right?”

“Yes.”

When Ariane nodded, we crossed the valley with transfer magic.

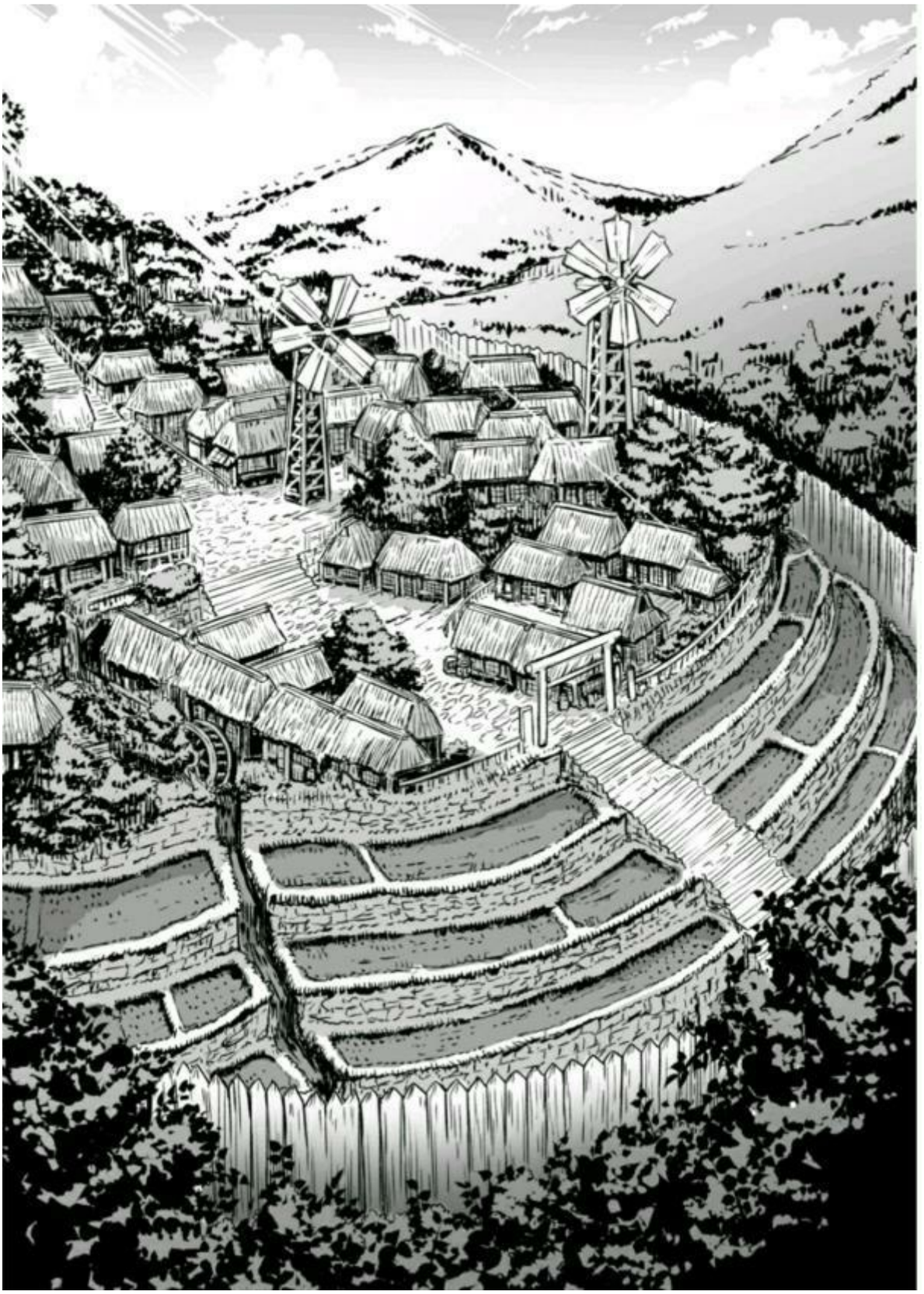
The day had almost passed, and dusk was gradually fading away by the time we finally set eyes upon Chiome’s hidden village.

An outer wall composed of wooden logs and an inner stone wall surrounding the village and the sharpened point atop the wall made it seem like a fortress rather than a village.

The main entrance was a drawbridge that was currently sealed tight to keep out intruders.

The village's houses were built along the slope and windmills were built at the top of the mountain. The was also a small field in-between the wooden and stone walls.

The landscape was reminiscent of Machu Picchu.



From here I could see the shadows of people maintaining the fields. Since monsters thrived in the mountainous regions, I ignored the emotions the picturesque view invoked.

It was impossible to say that this was an easy place to live in.

“The village is set on such a terrible slope……”

Ariane’s honest impression leaked out as glanced up at the village.

The majority of the Calcutta Mountain Range consisted of mountains and valleys, so it was next to impossible to find suitable land to build on.

This mountain face was probably the only somewhat flat area around.

“It’s praiseworthy that a village could be built in this place, but how many people live there now? I can’t imagine that there are all that many……”

It was an impressive achievement to build a safe haven in such a mountainous region, but the village was considerably smaller than Ariane’s childhood home, Raratoia.

Chiome’s blue eyes listlessly stared at her village as she answered my question.

“After the raid in the capital, the population surpassed one thousand people.”

“I see…… that’s quite the number of people.”

When I voiced my surprise, Ariane nodded while staring at the village as she agreed with the statement.

Only Ponta let out a large yawn while gently wagging her tail in Ariane’s arms.

She had decent insight when it came to food, but not for anything else. However, a spirit beast like Ponta fretting over things like population density would be a problem in it of itself.

When she saw Ponta’s innocent behavior, Chiome cleared away her melancholy expression.

“Well, let’s introduce you to the current head of the Blade Heart Clan.”

Chapter 18: 「The Hidden Village」 Part 2

While shouldering the Umbra Tiger, Ariane and I agreed with Chiome's suggestion and moved towards the village.

When we eventually reached the main entrance, a guard stationed in a nearby watchtower noticed us and started using a mallet to bang on a hanging wooden chime.

The sound rang through the entire village and the restless atmosphere it stirred in the village could be felt here.

A few minutes later, the drawbridge began to lower before it hit the ground with a heavy thump.

The drawbridge must have weighed a considerable amount, given the two logs bolted to it and its size.

While I was focusing on the gate, Chiome took a step forward.

"Nightfall is almost upon us, quickly enter the village. We don't know when another monster will appear."

"Understood." "Okay."

Ariane and I simultaneously answered and briskly walked into the village.

The bridge began to rise after we crossed it and the gate of the stone wall began to open.

As the gate closed behind us, we followed Chiome towards the center of the village with all eyes focused on us.

There were many children mixed within the crowd of people who had surrounded us as we passed by.

The crowd was most likely made up of multiple tribes, given the amount of different types of fluttering ears I saw, and when they realized I was carrying an Umbra Tiger they all started to cheer.

Chiome walked straight ahead without looking at the people and eventually stopped at the building in the center of the village.

“This is where Hanzo the 22nd, leader of the Blade Heart Clan, lives.”

The building Chiome point out resembled the residence near the hot spring.

Though this one was smaller, it had a cozier atmosphere and from the filigree that covered the building I could tell that a skilled carpenter had built this two-story building.

The neighboring wooden buildings were also built firmly, so the living standard of the People of the Mountain and Plains wasn’t that low.

After we entered the residence, Chiome led us to a wide room where a sole, elderly, cat-eared man stood.

He was around a hundred and eighty centimeters tall, had straight white hair that reached his lower back, and had a long beard and eyebrows reminiscent of a hermit.

With his hands behind his back, the man ran his eyes over each of us before he called out to Chiome, who stood in front of me.

“You’ve faced many hardships, haven’t you Chiome? Is the one behind you from the same country as the First?”

“Yes. The armored figure is Arc-dono, and the elf beside him is Ariane-dono.”

“Kyun!”

When Ariane and I bowed our heads at our introduction, Ponta raised a cry from Ariane’s arms as a self-introduction.

This made the old man smile before he corrected his posture.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Hanzo the 22nd, leader of the Blade Heart Clan. Arc-dono, Ariane-dono, on behalf of my brethren I would like to offer our gratitude for your help during the previous raid and I welcome you to our humble village. Can I assume the reason you’re here is that you’ve chosen to offer your assistance to us once again?”

Hanzo followed up his introduction with a question directed at me, so I placed the monster I’d been carrying on the ground and returned a proper

greeting.

"A pleasure to meet you as well. I am Arc, a humble traveler. I've been in Chiome-dono's care recently. When I learned of your plight, I decided to fulfill her request. Though I am lacking in skill, I offer my strength to your cause."

Since Hanzo gave me such a formal introduction I replied in a formal manner as well, but it felt like I was enacting an old historical drama.

"I am Ariane Glenys Maple. A warrior of Maple. Chiome-chan is a friend and I'm here as Arc's chaperone so that he doesn't cause you any trouble."

Ariane's own self-introduction caused Hanzo to start laughing and Chiome to lower her head in an attempt to hide her embarrassment.

Ariane's half-closed eyes lingered on me at the word 'chaperone'.

While I tried to figure out what that look meant, Hanzo looked at the dead Umbra Tiger and addressed me.

"Arc-dono, about that monster beside you……"

I pulled myself together and looked at the monster beside me.

"We were attacked by this beast on our way here and Chiome-dono said that this village had various uses for it. So I thought I'd offer it to the village as a gift."

The wrinkles on Hanzo's face deepened when he heard my answer.

"Oh, we appreciate it. Thank you for your kindness."

Hanzo raised his right hand as he said that, and several ninjas in similar garb as Chiome soundlessly appeared on both sides of the room, quickly carrying the Umbra Tiger away.

Appearing from the shadows, as you'd expect of trained ninjas.

Their sudden appearance even caught Ariane by surprise, since I saw her body twitch from the corner of my eye.

Hanzo looked quite gratified at our reactions and urged us deeper into

the residence.

"You must be tired from your journey. I'll make preparations for the two of you to stay the night. We can discuss the details of the request during tonight's supper."

When I nodded at Hanzo's offer, two cat-eared women appeared from the depths of the building.

"These two will guide you to your room, I'll call for you when supper is ready."

Hanzo turned his back to us in an attempt to leave when Chiome chased after him.

"Hanzo-sama, what about Sasuke's whereabouts?"

Even though Chiome spoke under her breath, I was still able to hear her.

It was the first time I've heard the name, but I had the feeling it was an honored name like Chiome's.

With an earnest expression on his face, Hanzo simply shook his head in response to her question.

As I watched the exchange between these two, one of the two women that had appeared previously called out to me, so I fixed my gaze on her.

"Arc-dono, please allow me to lead you to your room."

"Yes, if you would."

As we followed the two women, they led us to the second floor, to the two back rooms for Ariane and me.

The rooms were simple in design, with one shuttered window next to an elevated platform covered in a fur rug.

A bed, perhaps.

There was one impressively made wooden desk on the side and an oblong box to place one's luggage in.

There was an old lamp hanging in the doorway that dimly lit the room,

causing shadows to play across the room's interior.

"This room seems haunted……"

When I muttered my thoughts, someone replied to me.

"I'd say you're more like a ghost yourself, Arc……"

"Huh!?"

When I heard someone reply to my unwitting comment, I turned around only to have a green furball leaping into my face, blinding me for a moment.

"Kyun!"

"Ponta, I can't see anything."

When I pulled her off my face by the scruff of her neck, Ponta happily wagged her tail as she stared at me.

She must have been excited when she heard about dinner.

"Chiome-chan's village is more formal than I thought it'd be…… These people, do they really plan to leave this place behind?"

Ariane asked me about the village as she watched my exchange with Ponta.

Indeed, it was possible to build proper houses here, deep in the mountains and surrounded by high defensive walls to keep monsters out.

The maintained crop field was proof that they had been living here for years.

"Let's just see what they have to say during dinner. I'm willing to help them move with my transfer magic, it's not my place to oppose the will of the village."

"I see…… That reminds me, how are you going to get through dinner, Arc?"

Ariane shrugged a little and seemed to accept my answer before pointing at me and changing the topic.

From our arrival in the village to the meeting with Hanzo, I had kept my armor on.

While I had accidentally revealed my skeletal form to Chiome in Raratoia, I had yet to reveal it to anyone else. So I understood where she was coming from.

However, I was prepared this time……

“It’s okay, I brought this with me.”

When I pulled a leather canteen from my knapsack and showed it to her, she immediately realized its contents.

“Ah, that’s it.”

It was none other than the hot spring water I’d prepared before we left this morning. After drinking this, I should be able to sit down for a meal without frightening anyone.

The effects last for two hours, so nothing should go wrong.

Chapter 19: 「The Hidden Village」 Part 3

After a few minutes, the two women returned to inform us that dinner was ready.

When we arrived at the rear hall on the first floor, we were greeted by an elevated platform with some kind of hearth set in its center.

A huge steaming pot hung from the ceiling right above the hearth and the sound of simmering food could be heard coming from it.

“Please sit anywhere you like, Arc-dono. When Chiome told me you were from the same country as the first head, I never would have imagined that Arc-dono was a member of the elf tribe.”

Hanzo called out to me as he sat down in a cross-legged manner on the opposing side of the hearth and stroked his gray beard.

His comment was expected since I had taken off my helmet and was now revealing the dark-skinned, elven face that drinking the spring water gave me.

“There is a slight problem with my memory. Something that I’ve just recently learned. It’s uncertain if the lord Hanzo you speak of and me actually share a place of origin.”

I sat down in a similar crossed-legged manner on the opposite to Hanzo and gave him an ambiguous reply while picking up Ponta by the scruff of her neck.

Unfamiliar with the sitting posture, Ariane had to practice it a few times before she was able to take a seat beside me.

Hanzo watched Ariane’s stumbling with a heartwarming smile on his face before he suddenly turned to me and began to speak.

“Regarding the present matter, I’ve heard that Arc-dono is a mercenary. As long as it is a reasonable price, what is it that you would like to request as your reward, Arc-dono?”

Being reminded that we were here because I agreed to accept Chiome’s

request, I thought about a suitable reward.

Since I had only been thinking about helping Chiome at the time, I hadn't really put much thought into a reward and I couldn't think of anything at the moment.

"We can hardly call our village a rich one. Even though Arc-dono is a handsome one, would you like to have your pick of the beauties the village has to offer? Muhoho."

Hanzo raised one of his long eyebrows and started laughing like a dirty old man.

While it was a tempting offer, the hard stare I felt pointed in my direction prevented me from accepting it even as a joke.

So I decided to go with what I originally had wanted to ask for.

"Hanzo-dono, that won't be necessary. In fact, I believe you already learned that we found the former residence of your clan's founder. Due to certain circumstances, I would like to acquire it. How about making it the reward of for this task?"

I already had the Dragon King's permission to live in the area anyway.

Hanzo was taken aback when he heard my proposal and crossed his arms, nodding before he replied.

"After the founder passed away, Hanzo the 3rd decided to abandon the area completely, so even members of the clan have forgotten about it. Since Chiome has already retrieved the treasure that had been resting there, it's not necessary for Arc-dono to get our permission to live there. The area we intend to move to is quite a distance away from the residence..... Is there nothing else that you want Arc-dono?"

I crossed my arm and thought about what Hanzo had asked of me.

Ponta looked up at me with eyes questioning me for the promised dinner, and seem to be thinking as hard as I was.

Something I needed apart from the residence near the hot spring.....

"I'm grateful for you handing over the residence to me, but considering

how deteriorated it has become from lack of use, how about your clan repairing it for me? Since this village seems to house skillful carpenters, it shouldn't take much difficulty to gather some, right?"

The residence's roof had already collapsed and the floor had cracks in it, it would take various repairs before I could live there.

Even if I bought the necessary materials with the money I had, I didn't have much confidence in my ability to repair the place.

The best option would be to utilize this village's carpenters.

When I conveyed this to Hanzo he quietly stroked his beard and nodded.

"If it's something that simple, we're more than willing to help you, but is that really all you desire? There are busty girls as well, muhoho."

For a moment, Hanzo's eyes shifted to Ariane next to me as he spoke and once again laughed like a lecherous old man.

Perhaps he had been staring at Ariane's chest when she had been struggling before.

Was this grandpa really the head of the Blade Heart Clan……? I wouldn't be surprised if this guy was a substitute.

Even though the conversation had been derailed a bit, I was able to get the help I needed.

At the same time, that strange feeling of coercion I felt coming from my side increased. Wasn't I supposed to be immune to negative emotions with this body, or was it the other one?

While I thought it over, Ponta, with no regard to the situation, began jumping up and down on my knee demanding dinner.

……You're just a peaceful one, aren't you.

Stroking Ponta's head helped calm me down and allowed me to move the conversation along.

"No, the repairs should be fine."

"I see. I will dispatch a few skillful carpenters then. Chiome."

Hanzo nodded once to signify his agreement to my request, before calling out to Chiome.

The cat-eared ninja girl silently bowed her head at the hall's entrance before she entered.

As I looked over my shoulder to watch her, I noticed other silhouettes were accompanying hers.

One of the massive men that was accompanying Chiome was about two meters and thirty centimeters tall.

The man with hair like a mackerel tabby was named Goemon, one of the six strongest ninjas.

Though he had been shirtless back then, he was currently wearing tight fitting ninja clothes like Chiome, and he too nodded silently before entering.

Then someone even taller than Goemon entered the room.

The man was two meters and seventy centimeters tall..... he had to bend down to avoid hitting the ceiling as he walked into the hall.

The man's biceps were thicker than an average person's thighs and his rounded ears were in stark contrast to his deeply wrinkled face.

A small middle-aged man followed behind the giant.

Unlike the two before him, the man was only about a hundred and sixty centimeters tall. However, a single glance at him was enough to clue people in that he was not to be messed with.

Many scars lined the bits of his forearms that peaked out from his rolled-up sleeves and while he had long rabbit ears, one of them had been torn in half.

When he caught sight of me, a brutal smile appeared on the man's face.

The four of them took a seat on both of Hanzo's sides and offered a slight bow to Ariane and me.

Hanzo chose that moment to clear his throat and introduced our new

guests.

"Let's move on to the migration. You're already acquainted with Chiome and Goemon, so no need to reintroduce them. As for the remaining two, the larger man is the acting head of the village and member of the bear tribe, Gouro."

At Hanzo's prompting, the large bear slammed his fists into the ground as he lowered his head to the floorboards.

"I'm Gouro of the bear tribe and elected chief of the village. No words can express my gratitude for you accepting this request. I am forever indebted to you"

Gouro introduced himself in with a slightly monotonous voice before he thanked me for my help.

"Huh? I thought that Hanzo-dono was the leader of the village, was I wrong?"

When I heard that Gouro was the chief of the village, I turned towards Hanzo with a questioning gaze.

"While the Blade Heart Clan certainly helped building this village, there are several like it scattered throughout the continent. We're based here for now, but that is simply a temporary setup."

After Hanzo explained his clan's situation, I turned my eyes on the small man that sat beside Gouro.

The rather brutish rabbit-eared man lowered his head to me when our eyes met.

"I am Pitta of the rabbit tribe. I'm the village's head of security. I'm here on behalf of the advance team for the upcoming migration. I'll be in your care, Arc-dono."

The man who introduced himself as Pitta spoke in a rather gruff tone and gave me a vicious smile..... Ponta shrunk back when she saw that.

She was fine with me and my skeletal body, but the yakuza-like Pitta was too much for her. I guess spirit beasts didn't care for beast men

unconditionally.

When he saw Ponta's reaction, Pitta's eyebrows fell and he allowed his head to droop before he retreated from the hearth.

It must have really affected him……

Maybe tough looking rabbit uncles weren't in high demand.

While I had that thought, I tried to move the conversation to the main subject.

"Pitta-dono mentioned something about an advance party?"

"Yes, according to Chiome's report the Dragon King has given us his blessing to occupy a particular section of land, but it's still necessary to survey the area. We can take advantage of a nearby lake…… after the land is surveyed we'll rely on Arc-dono's power to send the first settlers to conduct the minimal land cultivation, then the remaining people."

Hanzo stroked his beard as he explained the relocation plans.

Judging from the what I saw when we climbed up the mountain with the hot spring, the lake they mentioned must have been a good distance away.

If I memorized the location around the lake, I should be able to transfer the settlers there next time.

Since the area would lack a defensive wall like the one this village had, the advance group might need to stay overnight to establish a defensive perimeter.

"I assume that the advance party will need a few days to prepare for the settlers. How will the relocation of the rest of the village be handled?"

There wasn't much I actually needed to do to fulfill this request, but it was still necessary for me to have an idea of the schedule.

Hanzo raised an eyebrow as if he noticed something and looked directly at me.

"It'll be a month or two at minimum before the main relocation. It

would be for the best if half of the villagers are relocated then."

So the village wasn't being abandoned, they were just relocating their excess numbers.

"I was under the notion that this village was being abandoned."

At my mutter, Hanzo nodded in confirmation.

"This village was set up as a refuge for my people. My brethren flee to mountainous regions should they manage to escape human nations because of the difficulty for humans to follow. I heard that the only reason the residence you intend to live in was abandoned was because the third head was incapable of mastering spatial-temporal ninjutsu."

The area wasn't easily accessible, to say the least. Without the use of spatial-temporal ninjutsu or transfer magic, one would need to traverse a monster-filled forest on foot.

The robust men in front of me would be okay making the journey, but there was a large number of women and children to consider. If there was no other option but relocation, they would need to be prepared for a large number of sacrifices.

However, why was such a destination chosen in the first place……

"Why are you returning to a land that's already been abandoned?"

Hanzo's eyes reflected understanding as he slowly shook his head.

"During the founder's time, there were still many of my people's villages scattered about. Those that were caught by humans were forced to bring them to those villages. As the human population increased my people were driven into the mountains. Now there is no place where human influence doesn't reach, and my people are on the decline. It's rare for anyone to even travel between the hidden villages now."

Only the sound of the hearth's crackling firewood and the simmering pot could be heard as everyone became silent.

If there was little flow between the villages, then a situation where everyone was related to everyone else would eventually come up.

The basin was located between mountains that humans had no access to, and the plains could be expanded if certain sections of the forest were cleared out.

If a new village could be built, then more people from other hidden villages can be moved there, thus solving the population problem..... probably.

Ariane had said that the People of the Mountain and Plains had built an impressive country on the Southern continent. However, humans held the power on the Northern continent, which made it difficult for the people here.

“I understand. Would the advance party be ready to set out tomorrow?”

“We’ll be in your care. Huh!?”

Hanzo bowed his head to me again but his expression became stiff when he looked up.

The talk had proceeded smoothly till now, but at the sudden change of atmosphere I took a look around.

Hanzo wasn’t the only one with a strained expression as both Chiome and Goemon stared at me in shock.

I could only see a slight change in Goemon’s expression but a remark from Ariane clued me in as to what had happened.

“Arc!? Your face turned back!?”

When I touched my own face I realized why everyone was looking at me strangely.

The effect time for the hot spring water was shorter than it should have been. Maybe the effect of the spring water started to diminish after a parting from its source.

If the freshness of the water had to be considered, then my use of it was more inflexible than I thought.

“Undead!?”

The people that had been sitting around the hearth shouted in utter confusion as they started to rise.

This conversation is becoming familiar..... was the thought crossing my mind as I began explaining my situation to everyone.

Illustrations

骸骨騎士様、只今異世界へお出掛け中 IV

Skeleton Knight, going out to the parallel universe

Ennki Hakai 秤猿鬼

illust. KeG

Credits

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